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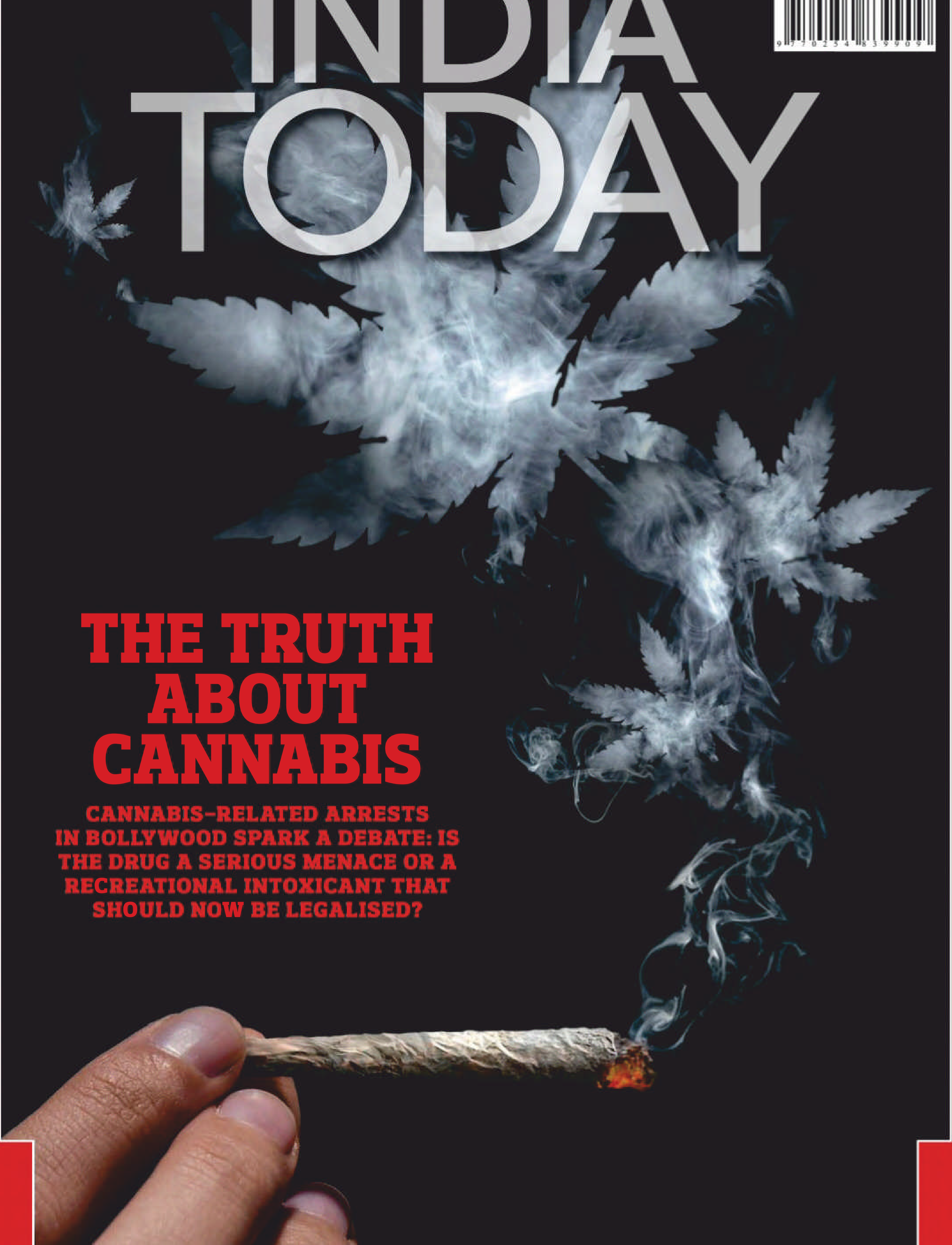

THE TRUTH ABOUT CANNABIS

CANNABIS-RELATED ARRESTS IN BOLLYWOOD SPARK A DEBATE: IS THE DRUG A SERIOUS MENACE OR A RECREATIONAL INTOXICANT THAT SHOULD NOW BE LEGALISED?

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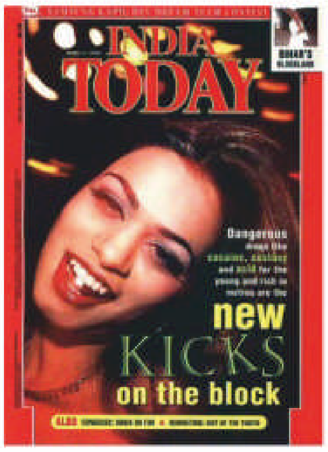
SCAN HERE TO APPLY

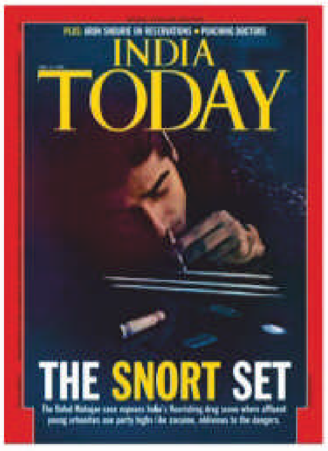
FROM THE

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

On September 9, the Narcotics Control Bureau (NCB) arrested Rhea Chakraborty, Bollywood actress and former partner of Sushant Singh Rajput. She was detained under the draconian provisions of the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances (NDPS) Act, 1985, for the illegal possession, transportation and purchase of cannabis. The NCB in its charge-sheet said it had recovered 59 grams of weed and five grams of a hash-like substance from three other suspects. Despite not being in possession of the drug herself, the NCB alleges they have enough evidence to prove that Rhea procured the drugs for the deceased actor. She has also been clubbed with drug peddlers and made out to be a part of a syndicate. In the application of its provisions, the NDPS Act seems to make little distinction between the consumer, the street peddler and the big dealer of the drug who sources it in bulk.



Our April 5, 1999 cover



Our June 19, 2006 cover

INDIA TODAY
THE NEW URBAN JUNKIE

Our August 30, 2010 cover

Cannabis consumption is widespread in India. An estimated 30 million people consume cannabis in the country, of which 13 million use weed and hash, derivatives of the cannabis plant. Cannabis has cultural acceptance in India—it finds mention in the Vedas, and the Hindu god Shiva is widely revered as the Lord of Bhang. A 2018 study by German data firm ABCD, which sourced figures from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, placed Delhi third on a list of 120 cities in the world with the highest annual consumption of cannabis.

There is, meanwhile, a petition before the Delhi High Court seeking the legalisation of the drug. The move has a potted history. The British gave up attempts to ban cannabis in India after a survey in 1894 revealed how widespread its consumption was. Reviewing that report almost a century later, the CSIR reiterated the finding in 1957. The policy changed dramatically in 1985 with the enactment of the NDPS Act, which criminalised the sale and consumption of cannabis.

This Act has seen the State invest disproportionate resources into prosecuting consumers. A study last year by the Vidhi Centre for Legal Policy noted that most people arrested for cannabis possession are the poor and marginalised, while the bigger sellers escape unscathed. Cannabis falls under the category of what are called recreational drugs. Criminalising its cultivation and sale hasn't curbed its production or consumption in India. There is thus an argument for regulating its sale and allowing states to earn from it just as they do from the sale of alcohol and tobacco. Globally, in the past decade, countries in South America, Europe and some states in the US have legalised the consumption of cannabis for recreational purposes. The ABCD report estimates New Delhi could raise up to Rs 725 crore a year and Mumbai Rs 641 crore, if cannabis were taxed at the same rate as the most popular cigarette in the city.

The enforcement agencies could then focus their resources on tackling the use of far more serious drugs such as heroin and cocaine. Those opposing legalisation argue that smoking cannabis could lead to lung cancer and that it is a stepping-stone drug, a gateway to the use of cocaine and heroin. However, the same can be said for the excess consumption of alcohol and cigarettes—both can be addictive and harmful to health. Besides, by criminalising a widespread activity, you encourage a vast criminal network, especially when big money is involved. The cannabis business in India is estimated to be worth Rs 1.29 lakh crore.

Our cover story, 'The Truth about Cannabis', written by Associate Editor Sonali Acharjee, looks at the inconvenient reality behind this debate—that this substance is already widely and routinely consumed. As the former Narcotics Commissioner Romesh Bhattacharjee told her, "Sensitisation and dialogue are more effective in curbing addiction than half-hearted criminalisation."

History has shown that three activities will continue to flourish in some form or the other when they are banned or criminalised—gambling, prostitution and the consumption of any kind of intoxicant. It is time we faced up to the reality of the widespread use of cannabis in India.

(Aroon Purie)

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INSIDE

UPFRONT
DELHI RIOTS: REIMAGINING PROVOCATIONS PG 15

SINGLE ELECTORAL ROLLS, ANYONE? PG 26

LEISURE
STATE OF PLAY PG 79

Q&A WITH KUBBRA SAIT PG 86

32
COVER STORY

SHOULD INDIA LEGALISE CANNABIS?

Given its widespread use and the ancient and well-established culture of marijuana in India, it's time to debate its decriminalising

Illustration by NILANJAN DAS

CHINA-LADAKH
44 **LADAKH'S COLD WAR**
As the India-China standoff continues, the Indian armed forces are stocking up to survive the winter

MAHARASHTRA
50 **UDDHAV IN THE EYE OF A STORM**
The CM is under fire for his inability to contain the Covid spread, revive industry and his poor handling of the Sushant case

AGRICULTURE
58 **FARMERS' MARKET**
Why cultivators are worried about three bills in Parliament right now

INTERVIEW
66 **"WE'RE NOT REBELS"**
Congress leader Ghulam Nabi Azad on their letter to Sonia Gandhi

SOCIAL MEDIA
70 **WHY THE ANGER?**
The business models of social media platforms thrive on anger & hatred

Cover by NILANJAN DAS

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64

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SERVICE AND TRUST

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LIFE INSURANCE CORPORATION OF INDIA

Zindagi ke saath bhi, Zindagi ke baad bhi.

Zindagi ke saath bhi,
Zindagi ke baad bhi.

M R KUMAR, CHAIRMAN

IN THE INTEREST OF PEOPLE

What the world needs today, in these days of pandemic, the uncertainty and fear that's associated with it, is a sense of assurance and an anchor of security and reliability.

'LIC of India', synonymous with people's welfare, has been a supportive structure over decades for generation of Indians'. Financial planning and securing the needs of the families is incomplete without LIC.

As India's oldest and largest life insurance company we have been instrumental in impacting the lives of millions. Life Insurance has not only provided risk cover, but also instilled habit of compulsory saving among the people. The current situation has validated this custom. LIC is present during tough times to help people manage their financial concerns.

Unlike several other sectors where the private players have become market leaders after the opening of the sector, LIC continues to be the market leader even after nearly two decades of entry of private players in the Life Insurance sector. This has been possible because of the relentless diligence by all employees and associates of LIC.

Our new business performance for the year ending March 2020 has shown a growth of 25.17% in its first year premium by posting a highest ever figure of ₹1,77,977.07 crore. We have also created history in the Pension & Group Superannuation business, crossing ₹1 lakh crore as new business premium income.

Historically our Claims settlement record has been a source of pride for us. We have settled claims amounting to ₹1,59,770.32 Crore for year ending March 2020.

We have extended all possible support to our policyholders in the back drop of Covid-19 in terms of premium payments and claims settlement. We shall also play a strong role at this time by providing adequate risk cover.

With the recent addition of LIC's Nivesh Plus and LIC's SIIP to our existing ULIP plan New Endowment Plus, we now have a bouquet of unit linked plans to address the different needs of prospective policyholders. Going forward we aim to grow in both market share and premium collection.

> **We will work towards addressing the needs of policyholders and at the same time, will continue with the numerous Nation Building projects that the government takes up with investments in infrastructure and social sector.**

LIC has entered its 65th year on 1st September, 2020. Over the past six decades, we accepted many challenges and have moved forward gaining invaluable experience and turning them into opportunities of growth. All of this has been possible because of the collective efforts and tenacity of Team LIC, including the trust of our invaluable policyholders.

With "Customer-first" approach and working towards providing assurance and peace of mind to them, we shall continue to play a significant role in spreading life insurance widely across the country.

A Milestone Year

Over the past 64 years, LIC has set new milestones and broken many of its own performance records. The year 2019-20 was no different when the corporation set several unprecedented performance records in various aspects of life insurance business. Ever since the opening of the life insurance sector nearly two decades ago, LIC has played a dominant role leading the market. For LIC, new business premium, number of claims settled and the new business in pension and groups schemes have all witnessed stupendous growth.

All of this was possible with its tireless pursuit to provide the best product and service to people across India. Many of the products offered by LIC cater to all sections of the society. In 2019-20, it had 27 products for individuals that addressed all types of consumers and their insurance needs.

PMVVY

The Pradhan Mantri Vaya Vandana Yojana (PMVVY) is offered only by LIC for senior citizens who are above 60 years old. This scheme gives a guaranteed payout of pension at a specified rate for 10 year tenure.

Even the total assets of LIC touched a new peak and the corporation has set new targets which should help it maintain its good show and at the same time serve the people of the country through its numerous sales channels, especially the digital route which has fast finding acceptance among policyholders.

27
Plans available to individuals

₹31,14,496.05 crore
Total life fund

₹3,79,062.56 crore
Total premium income

₹2,54,222.27 crore
Payment to Policyholders

₹1,59,770.32 crores
Total amount of claims paid

215.98 Lakh
Total number of claims settled

28.92 Crore
Individual Policies in force

219.25 Lakh
Composite number of policies sold in 2019-20

> **Earlier this year, despite the nationwide lockdown in April and May 2020, LIC had a net addition of 13,740 agents, and at the end of July, LIC had a net addition of 58,216 agents, which was possible because of our digital foray and persistence to ensure policyholders can be reached by more number of agents.**

*All figures as on 31st March, 2020

LIC
भारतीय जीवन बीमा निगम
LIFE INSURANCE CORPORATION OF INDIA

CUSTOMER CONNECT

LIC has been a trailblazer in embracing technology for supporting its sales and servicing functions. The focus has now shifted to enhancing the online and digital presence in order to become more customer-centric, and create operational efficiencies.

The Centralized Call Center number works 24x7 in Hindi and English and can be accessed through 022-68276827. Further, the "Customer Services" section on LIC website www.licindia.in allows customers to update their contact details in their policy records by providing their mobile number and email address. Registered policyholders can use the portal to renew policies, pay premiums, apply for loan, make loan repayment, download premiums paid certificate, check their policy status and seek revival quotations in case of a lapsed policy besides other services they may require. LIC also extensively uses SMS services to reach out to policyholders as reminders and updates.

PREMIUM PAYING OPTIONS

1. **Online through LIC Customer Portal:** Renewal premium can be paid through net banking, digital wallets, UPI, Amex, Credit/Debit cards of VISA/MasterCard/Diners/Rupay (Domestic Cards only). This platform is enabled to accept renewal premium payment in advance.
2. **Mobile Application:** Premium can be paid online using the LIC mobile app, Paytm app, PhonePe, GooglePay and Amazon Pay
3. **Premium Point and Life Plus Centers:** Premium can be paid in cash or cheque at premium points of authorized LIC agents and retired employees and at Life Plus offices of SBAs.
4. **Banks:** Premium can be paid in cash or cheque at any branch of IDBI Bank, and in cash or cheque drawn on collecting bank at any branch of City Union Bank and Axis Bank.
5. **NACH:** Policyholders can contact the agent or servicing branch to avail the facility of auto debit from any bank through a NACH (National Automated Clearing House) mandate.
6. **Bill Pay OR EBPP:** Customers can register for this facility of debit through the websites of ICICI Bank, Axis Bank, Federal Bank, Bill Desk and Ingenico
7. **Franchisees:** Premium can be paid in cash at the collection centres of CSC e-governance, APT Online, MP Online or Suvidha Infoserve.
8. **Automatic Premium Payment Service (Apps) Through LICMF:** Investors of LIC Mutual Funds can give standing instructions to LICMF for debit of LIC premium payments from their mutual funds account.

SERVING THE POLICYHOLDER ACR

LIC of India has always focused on policyholder's interests and that is best done through a widespread presence with easy access for all types of customer. There are over 40,000 offices where customers can connect directly with LIC personnel and/or Agents and for the younger and digitally savvy policyholder, the online presence and LIC App is a way for them to stay connected.

The digital push by LIC has resulted in 1.4 crore registered users on LIC's customer portal, covering nearly 3 crore policies. In the first quarter of the current financial year, the online transactions grew by 50% and about 70% of premium transactions have come from outside the branch network. The digital transaction on policies in 2019-20 clocked a 36% growth and the digital collections rose by 31.5%.

DIRECT MARKETING: This channel provides excellent buying experience to customers with enhanced support of IT, especially to young, tech savvy executives and High Net worth Individuals. It has expanded to 119 units across 112 divisions.

BANCASSURANCE TIE-UP: LIC has tie-ups with 10 PSU Banks, 6 private banks, 16 regional rural banks, 43 co-operative banks and 1 foreign bank under corporate agency agreement. Besides the banks, it has tie-ups with 69 other corporate agents and 121 insurance marketing firms, as its channel partners.

MICRO INSURANCE: LIC has also policies in the micro insurance space with term insurance plans such as LIC's Bhagya Lakshmi, LIC's New Jeevan Mangal and Endowment Plan LIC's Micro Bachat. These policies are sold through a specialized distribution channel comprising of NGO, SHGs, MFI, Corporate Agents, select Conventional Agents, Brokers, District Cooperative Banks (DCB), Regional Rural Banks (RRB) and Urban Cooperative Banks (UCB) etc.

HEALTH INSURANCE: Currently LIC has two health products, LIC's Jeevan Arogya and LIC's Cancer Cover. Both are non-linked fixed benefit Health Insurance Plan

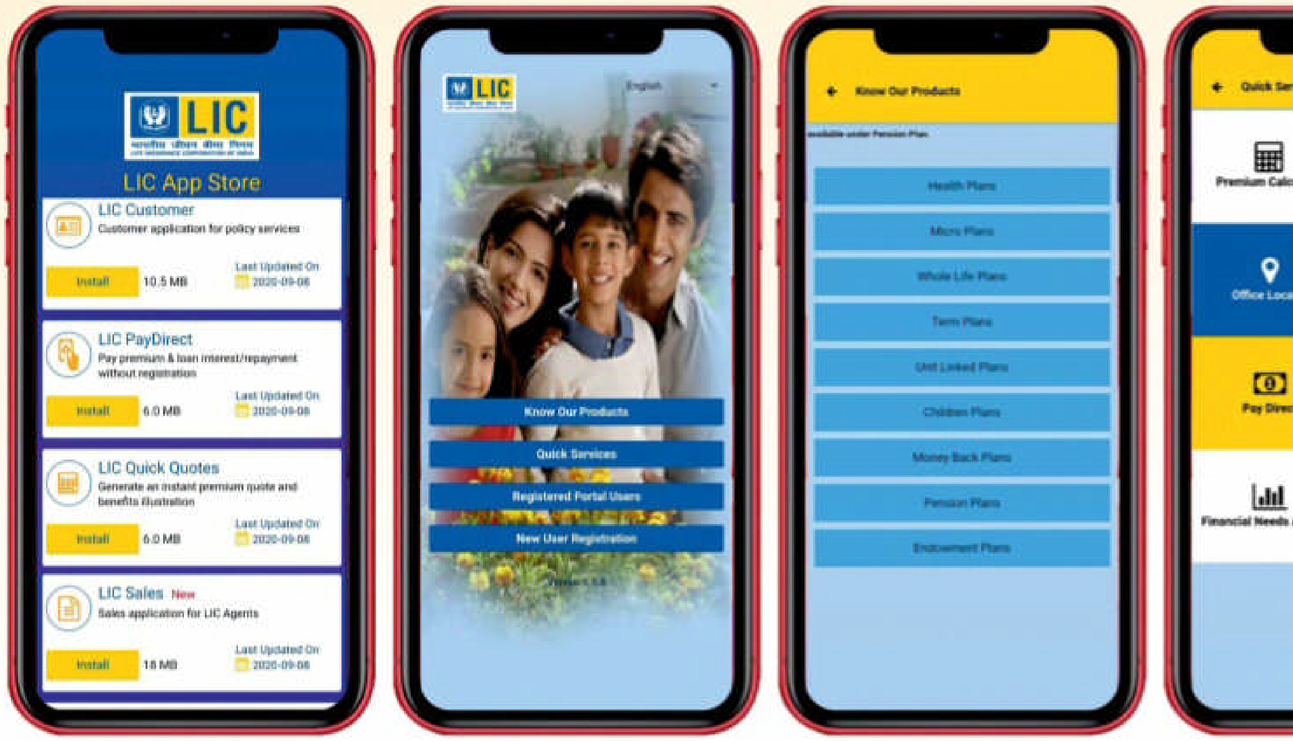
ONLINE PRODUCTS: LIC offers six online products – LIC's Tech Term, LIC's Cancer Cover, LIC's Jeevan Shanti, LIC's Nivesh Plus, LIC's SIIP and LIC's Jeevan Akshay-VII.

In keeping up with the changing times, LIC has been active in the usage of social media presence through Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and YouTube. The total commitment to serving the policyholders has been appreciated and makes LIC the preferred insurer

LIC's Digital Initiatives

Renewal Premium through alternate channel digital collection	Renewal Premium through alternate channel digital collection
₹41,741.37 crore in 2019-20	**₹26,821.88 Crore** as on August 31, 2020
₹31,722.76 crore in 2018-19	**₹14,192.92 Crore** as on August 31, 2019
Growth: **31.58%**	Growth: **88.98%**

LIC Mobile App: Facilit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LIC Customer
Customer application for policy services
Install
10.5 MB
Last Updated On 2020-09-08
LIC PayDirect
Pay premium & loan interest/repayment without registration
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Sales application for LIC Agents
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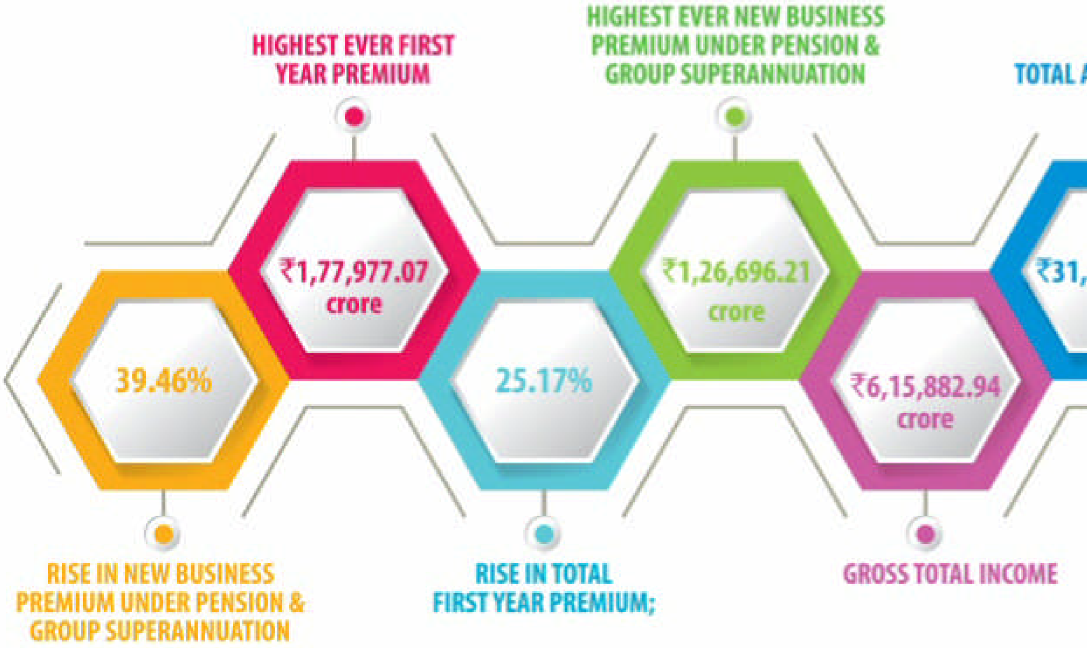
HIGHEST EVER FIRST YEAR PREMIUM

₹1,77,977.07 crore

HIGHEST EVER NEW BUSINESS PREMIUM UNDER PENSION & GROUP SUPERANNUATION

₹1,26,696.21 crore

TOTAL A

₹31,

39.46%

RISE IN NEW BUSINESS PREMIUM UNDER PENSION & GROUP SUPERANNUATION

25.17%

RISE IN TOTAL FIRST YEAR PREMIUM;

₹6,15,882.94 crore

GROSS TOTAL INCOME

OSS THE COUNTRY

Alternatives for renewal premium collection

- Debit/Credit card
- Net Banking
- UPI
- Wallets
- PhonePe
- Google Pay
- PayTm
- Instapay
- Amazon Pay
- Billpay
- NACH

Growth in number of digital collections as on August 31, 2020 (YoY):
42.36%

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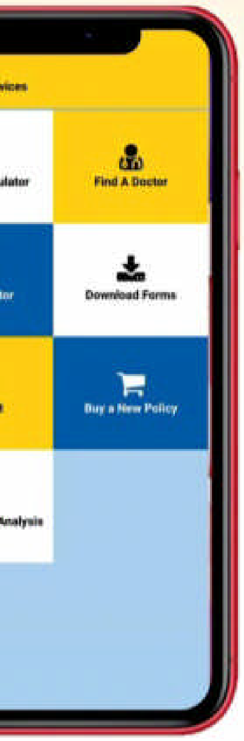
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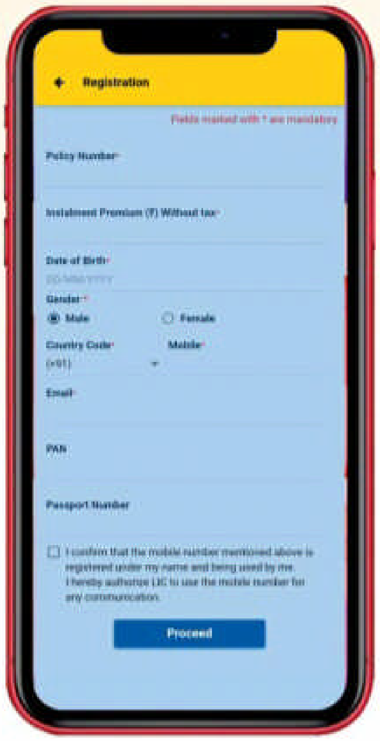

Registration

Fields marked with * are mandatory

Policy Number*

Instalment Premium (₹) Without tax*

Date of Birth*

Gender*
● Male ○ Female

Country Code* (+91) Mobile*

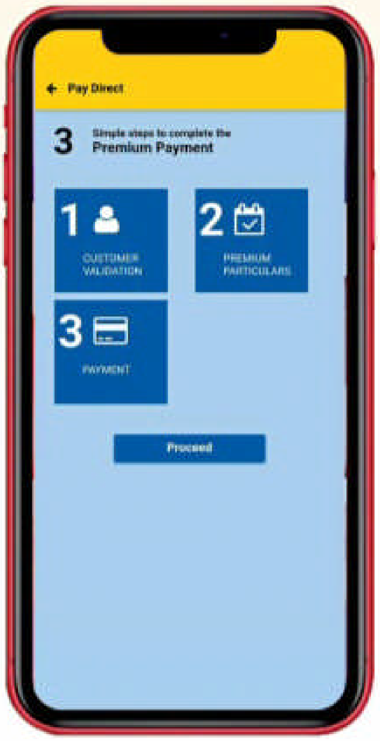
Email*

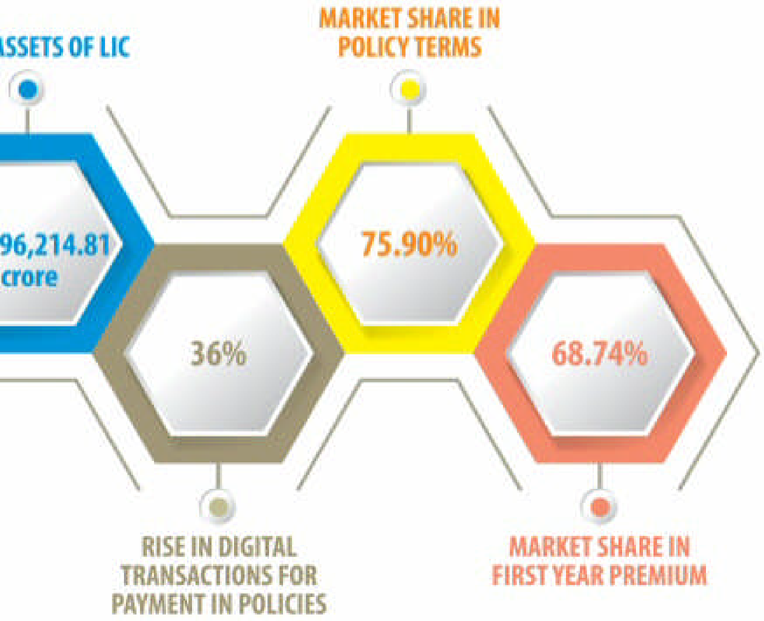
PAN

Passport Number

☐ I confirm that the mobile number mentioned above is registered under my name and being used by me. I hereby authorise LIC to use the mobile number for any communication.

Proceed


Pay Direct
3 Simple steps to complete the Premium Payment
1 CUSTOMER VALIDATION
2 PREMIUM PARTICULARS
3 PAYMENT
Proceed



All figures for FY 2019-20

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1

Click on customer portal on
https://www.licindia.in/
page

2

For registration for online services on portal, keep the following ready:

- Policy numbers on your own life and on the life of your minor children
- Instalment premiums under these policies (without service tax/GST)
- Scanned image of PAN Card or Passport, with file size less than 100 KB
- The scanned image should be preferably in .jpg or .jpeg format.
- However, images with the following formats can also be uploaded: bmp, .png, gif, .tiff

3

Click on **"New user"**, provide the details of policy, date of birth, username and password etc. Now you are a registered Portal user.

4

For availing e-Services, click on the tab 'e-Services'

- Login with the user-id created and register your policies for availing the e-services by filling up the form provided.
- Print the form, sign it and upload the scanned image of the form.
- Upload the scanned image of PAN Card or Aadhaar Card or Passport.
- After verification by our offices, an acknowledgement e-mail and SMS will be sent to you.
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Collaboration
Commitment
Discipline
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Sensitivity
Excellence

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Fiji Branch, Mauritius Branch and UK Branch

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भारतीय जीवन बीमा निगम
LIFE INSURANCE CORPORATION OF INDIA

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> "Spread Life Insurance widely and in particular to the rural areas and to the socially and economically backward classes with a view to reaching all insurable persons in the country and providing them adequate financial cover against death at a reasonable cost."

For every Indian

LIC's motto is inspired from the Bhagvad Gita's 9th Chapter; "Yogakshemam Vahamyaham" which translates to "Your welfare is our responsibility". LIC has believed in the welfare of the country through all its initiatives that has gone into building several infrastructural developments in India. At the same time, its slogan "Zindagi ke saath bhi, Zindagi ke baad bhi" defines the purpose of life insurance – provide service to policyholders during their lifetime and make sure their families can maintain their dignities in their absence.

LIC has created products that cater to the need of every Indian, because the corporation believes that every life matters. LIC has participated in many development schemes and policies initiated by the Government of India including numerous social security schemes which impacts the lives of those in the fringes. LIC has done all of this with its own systems, networks, employees and agent network who have time and again worked towards furthering the cause of LIC in India and in other countries that it operates.

People's welfare

LIC has been a nation builder since its formation in 1956. True to the objective of nationalization, LIC has mobilized the funds invested by the people in the life insurance for the benefit of the community at large. National priorities and obligation of reasonable returns to the policyholders are the main criteria of our investments. The total funds, so invested for the benefit of the community at large was ₹30,69,942 crore as on 31st March 2020

- **8** Zonal offices
- **113** Divisional Office
- **74** Customer Zones
- **2,048** Branch Office
- **1,526** Satellite Office
- **4,045** Life Plus Offices
- **930** Life Point Office
- **31,556** Premium Points
- **248** Bima Connect
- **1,14,498** Number of employees
- **12,08,826** Agents

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31.96 Lakh Crore Assets

*all figures as on 31/03/2020

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ECONOMY:
THE GST MUDDLE
PG 18

MP: TWO BJP
LEADERS AND AN
ELECTION PG 22

MLA SHOPPING
IN WEST BENGAL
PG 20

SINGLE ELECTORAL
ROLLS, ANYONE?
PG 26

MAIN KARDAMPURI PULIYA

THE RIOTS BEGIN
Pro- and anti-CAA protesters clash at Jafrabad in northeast Delhi on February 24

K. ASIF

DELHI RIOTS INVESTIGATION

REIMAGINING PROVOCATION

By Kaushik Deka

On September 13, a political slugfest erupted over reports claiming that the Delhi Police had named a number of political leaders and intellectuals—like CPI(M) general secretary Sitaram Yechury, Swaraj Abhiyan leader Yogendra Yadav, economist and Jawaharlal Nehru University professor Jayati Ghosh, Delhi University professor Apoorvanand and documentary filmmaker Rahul Roy—as co-conspirators in a supplementary chargesheet relating to the riots in northeast Delhi this February. The Delhi Police denied the reports, saying that Yechury and these others had not been named as 'accused' but their names had come up in the "disclosure statements" of those accused in the case. This denial didn't do much to deflect persistent criticism from civil society groups and public intellectuals that the riots investigations have been one-sided and motivated—and that the police has determinedly looked away from evidence pointing to other actors who played a pivotal role in inflaming passions that may have led to the communal violence. The AAP-ruled Delhi state government and a fact-finding report by the Delhi Minorities Commission also earlier accused the Delhi Police, which answers to the Union home ministry, of bias. However, in a response to a letter by former Mumbai police commissioner Julio Rebeiro seeking an impartial investigation, Delhi police commissioner S.N. Shrivastava said that the probe was guided by facts and evidence and not by reputation and personalities.

Even so, the courts have also ticked off the Delhi Police, while exhorting them to conduct an impartial investigation. In May, additional sessions judge Dharmender Rana, hearing an application for the judicial remand of a Jamia Millia Islamia student, observed

FEBRUARY 24-26

Riots in northeast Delhi

53

killed in clashes, with about 200 injured

1,575

arrested in connection with the riots, with over 250 chargesheets filed

……

FEBRUARY 27

Delhi High Court directs Delhi Police to register FIRs against those who had made hate speeches; plays clips of speeches by Kapil Mishra, Union minister Anurag Thakur and BJP MP Parvesh Singh Verma, directing the police to take note

……

JULY 14

Delhi Police tells Delhi HC "no actionable evidence had surfaced yet indicating any role being played by" said political leaders in "instigating and/ or participating in the riots"

that the "investigation seemed to be targeted only towards one end". On July 24, Rana said the Delhi Police was in a "state of inscrutable indolence" after being informed that the police had not yet examined the security camera footage from Maujpur and Jafrabad metro stations, the epicentres of the riot.

In the case of Yechury and others, the original chargesheet, filed by the Crime Branch in a Karkardooma court, is against Devangana Kalita and Natasha Narwal, members of a women students' collective called Pinjra Tod, and Gulfisha Fatima, an MBA student of Jamia Millia Islamia. It relates to the violence at Jafrabad in February, where an anti-CAA sit-in protest was held before the riots began. While the Delhi High Court had earlier granted Kalita bail—the police had not produced any material proving that her speech instigated women from any particular community—all three are currently in jail because they also face charges under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA) in a case filed by the Delhi Police Special Cell.

In its supplementary chargesheet naming Yechury and others, police cite the "disclosure statements" of Narwal and Kalita, alleging that they had been directed by Ghosh, Apoorvanand and Roy to protest in different parts of Delhi against the CAA and the NRC. Yechury and Yadav, police said, were named in Gulfisha's disclosure statement, alleging they had taken part in anti-CAA demonstrations to "provoke and mobilise" crowds. The chargesheet claimed that these "provocative statements" upset people from "other communities", who then counter-protested the anti-CAA agitations—which led to violence. The language of the chargesheets gives the impression that the provocation for the communal violence came from the anti-CAA protesters and the pro-CAA groups acted in retaliation.

On February 23, apparently provoked by the anti-CAA Jafrabad sit-in, the BJP's Kapil Mishra issued a public ultimatum to the Delhi Police that he and his followers would take to the streets if anti-CAA protesters were not removed from protest sites. A day later, riots broke out. Curiously, Mishra, who even tweeted his inflammatory statements and videos, still remains outside the ambit of the investigation. On February 27, the Delhi high court, while directing the Delhi police to register FIRs against those who had made hate speeches and sparked off days of rioting in northeast Delhi, had played clips of speeches by Mishra, Union minister Anurag Thakur and BJP MP Parvesh Singh Verma, directing the police to take note. On July 14, the Delhi Police informed the high court that "no actionable evidence had surfaced yet indicating any role being played by" these political leaders in "instigating and/ or participating in the riots".

Nonetheless, on September 14, the Delhi Police Special Cell questioned filmmakers Rahul Roy and Saba Dewan. Police sources claim to have found links between the two and a students' outfit, and also with a WhatsApp group called the 'Delhi Protests Support Group'. Professor Apoorvanand had also earlier been questioned over an alleged link with this group. Others mentioned in the chargesheet—Yechury, Yadav and Ghosh—have not yet been summoned and questioned.

A person being named in a chargesheet 'as an accused' is a different matter from a person's name 'figuring in an accused's statement'. While the law does not use the phrase 'disclosure statements', this term is used in the context of Section 27 of the Indian Evidence Act. Section 27 allows limited use of information an accused may disclose to the police while in custody as 'evidence'. It states that when an unknown fact is discovered as a result of information given by an accused, it may be used as evidence. It is, however, up to the court to decide which part of a disclosure statement is admissible. Until then, investigating agencies are at liberty to use disclosure statements to pursue a probe as they deem fit.

Yechury, while slamming the Delhi Police for its "illegitimate, illegal actions", which were a "direct outcome of the politics [of] the BJP's top leadership", dared the officers handling the probe to arrest him. In an interview, he denied knowing or having ever met Gulfisha Fatima. Yadav, in a tweet, said that the supplementary chargesheet did not mention him or Yechury as a co-conspirator or an accused, alleging that the Delhi Police was trying to drag all anti-CAA protesters into one circle of conspirators. Amid the controversy over the supplementary chargesheet, the Special Cell arrested former JNU student Umar Khalid on September 13 for his alleged role in the riots. Khalid has already been charged earlier under the stringent UAPA in another case related to the riots.

The communal clashes that took place in northeast Delhi in February left 53 people dead and around 200 injured. The Delhi Police claims that, so far, 1,575 people have been arrested, out of which 1,153 accused—571 Hindus and 582 Muslims—have been chargesheeted, with 250 chargesheets filed. ■

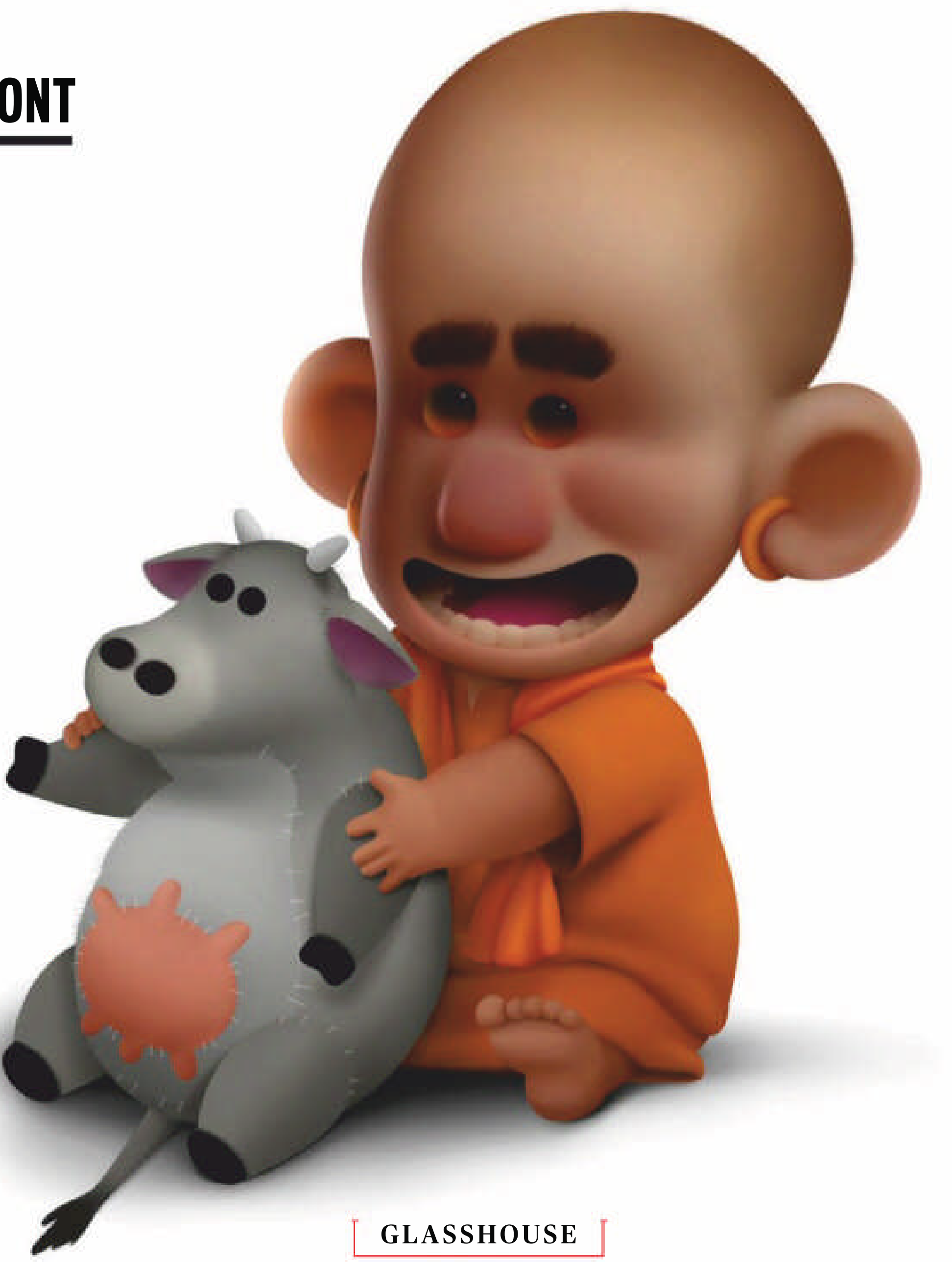


Illustration by SIDDHANT JUMDE

GLASSHOUSE

BOVINE MERCY

Uttar Pradesh chief minister Yogi Adityanath has come up with an inventive way to beat the problem of malnutrition. He recently issued instructions to district magistrates to provide one healthy cow free of cost to the families of malnourished children, along with Rs 900 a month for the cow's fodder. The district officers have begun the process and hope to begin handing over the healthy cows in *gaushalas* across the state to families by the end of September. Since assuming power, Yogi has made concerted efforts to protect cows—a large-scale illegal slaughter house was shut down by the state and *sarkari* cowsheds—one for each district—have been constructed at a cost of Rs 1.15 crore. Yogi also likes to feed the 500 cows at the *gaushala* he set up with the Gokaknath temple in Gorakhpur whenever he visits. A *gau rakshak*, if ever there was one.

Maternal Instinct

Jumping to people's aid comes naturally to West Bengal chief minister **Mamata Banerjee**. She has often come to the rescue of homeless people, ensuring they find shelter. She once stopped her convoy to help a motorcyclist lying injured on the road after an accident and had her pilot car take him to the hospital. About a month ago, she arranged for the medical treatment of an elderly neighbour who was unwell and living alone.

ANI

Mamata's image as the elder sister is slowly evolving into that of a mother. But, determined to be no ordinary *Ma*, she has designed simple blue-bordered saris for herself which hold a striking similarity to the uniform of the sisters of the Missionaries of Charity. Blue and white is among Mamata's favourite combinations, but now it's more than just a fashion statement.

—Sandeep Unnithan with Ashish Misra, Amarnath K. Menon, Romita Datta & Rahul Noronha

JUNGLE WARFARE

Madhya Pradesh forest minister **Kunwar Vijay Shah** plans to create a riot police squad of sorts within the forest department and has given orders for the outfit to be trained in controlling and, if necessary, teargassing, unruly crowds. A seven-term MLA and minister for 15 years, Shah announced his decision after alleged forest encroachers attacked a forest department team in his home district Khandwa. The foresters are already equipped with shotguns, which has been an issue for the state police. They have also been booked by the police for using the guns in the line of duty. Keeping this in mind, one can only wonder what the police will have to say about Shah's idea.

ANI

Without Thalaivi

With the assembly poll scheduled for April 2021, Tamil Nadu chief minister **Edappadi K. Palaniswami** is hard at work to ensure his party, the AIADMK, wins for the third time in a row. The party is enlisting volunteers to its youth and women wings for each of the 65,000 polling booths in the state. Backed by a robust IT wing, these foot soldiers will be tasked with wooing voters first hand and door-to-door if possible, despite the constraints on campaigning during a pandemic. The party is clearly hoping to start its campaign on the right foot.

GST COMPENSATION

A BREAKDOWN OF TRUST

By SHWWETA PUNJ

Three years after India began implementing a bold new, if still undercooked, Goods and Services Tax (GST) regime on July 1, 2017, a hard-won agreement between the Centre and states on the terms of transition is being severely tested. The latest sore disagreement is over the Centre's decision to withhold the promised compensation to states for shortfalls in their tax revenues as a result of implementing GST.

GST collections were hit hard as the economy ground to a near-standstill during the lockdown, and after dragging its feet for a while, the Centre broke the bad news to the states in the GST council meeting on August 27. Union finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman announced that the Centre would perforce have to withhold the promised compensation. Many were bracing for this when Sitharaman served notice in that same meeting with her statement that the Covid-19 pandemic was an 'act of god'.

To tide over the crisis and as an alternative way of compensating for their revenue shortfalls, the states, Sitharaman said at the GST council meeting, would have two options: borrow up to Rs 97,000 crore, the projected shortfall arising from the implementation of GST, in a special window facilitated by the RBI, or borrow the entire Rs 2.35 lakh crore, the total projected loss for the financial year, from the debt market. The compensation amount for 2020-21 is estimated at Rs 3 lakh crore, of which only Rs 65,000 crore will be paid out of the cess levied by the Centre. On the remaining Rs 2.35 lakh crore, the Centre has granted itself an 'act of God' waiver!

The baldness of this statement has obviously riled states no end, who are desperately short of revenues to fund both capital expenses and welfare initiatives—and have no additional tax levers. (Apart from stamp duty, the only two GST-exempt sources of tax revenues for states are petroleum and alcohol.) In fact, the consensus to give up the myriad indirect taxes was won with the promise to compensate states for their revenue shortfall.

The shortfall was to be assessed, assuming a 14 per cent growth rate in GST revenues. The 14 per cent growth rate was, in turn, based on assumptions of GST buoyancy and nominal GDP growth. However, it has been three years since GST was implemented and tax collections have been anything but buoyant. The GST cess, which was to finance the compensation payment to states, was failing to garner enough funds even before the pandemic struck.

₹3
LAKH CRORE
The GST compensation amount for FY20-21

52.5%
The contraction in indirect taxes during the first quarter of FY20-21

The economic slowdown, which had already set in before the pandemic, has naturally impacted tax revenues as well. Indirect taxes—consisting of Union excise duty, service tax, customs duty, central GST, Union territory GST, integrated GST and GST compensation cess—showed a sharp contraction of 52.5 per cent during the April-June quarter of FY2020-21, compared with a 4 per cent contraction in the corresponding first quarter of FY2019-20.

Payment delays in GST compensation started nearly a year ago—when compensation was delayed for August-September 2019. The Centre first admitted to a problem at the 37th GST council meeting held in Goa last September. On November 27, 2019, it wrote to the states that the GST and compensation cess collections in the previous few months had become "a matter of concern" and that compensation requirements were "unlikely to be

ANI

FALLING SHORT
Union finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman (centre) at the 41st GST council meeting via video conferencing in New Delhi on August 27

met". The compensation payment of Rs 35,298 crore for August-September 2019, due in October, was paid in December; and payments for October and November 2019 were released in February and April 2020.

Thirteen BJP-ruled states have quietly fallen in line with the Centre's fallback plan, and submitted their borrowing choices. Twelve have opted for the first option; only Meghalaya has said it will borrow from the market. Non-BJP states, however, are up in arms against what they say is a violation of the spirit of the agreement that formed the basis of implementing GST.

> **KERALA HAS ARGUED THAT THE FRBM LIMIT ON THE FISCAL DEFICIT OF STATES SHOULD BE RAISED BY AT LEAST 1.5 PERCENTAGE POINTS**

West Bengal, Telangana, Kerala, Delhi, Chhattisgarh and Tamil Nadu have written to the Centre, opposing the proposal that states borrow to meet their shortfall. Kerala has said enforcing a cut in compensation and making a distinction between GST- and Covid-related loss of revenue is unconstitutional. It has also argued that the FRBM (Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management) limit on the fiscal deficit of states should be raised by at least 1.5 percentage points if Rs 2.35 lakh crore is to be borrowed from the market. Delhi has raised concerns that the national capital's status of a Union territory could hurt its ability to borrow via the RBI (in the first option). West Bengal has argued that any other interpretation of the compensation-related Section 18 of the Constitution Act 2016—which ushered in GST—is indefensible (Sec. 18 of the Act says Parliament on the recommendation of the GST council will provide compensation to states for the loss of revenue arising from implementation of GST for five years).

Under the first option, the amount can be repaid after five years of GST, ending June 2022; there is also a 0.5 per cent relaxation in the borrowing limit under the FRBM Act. No FRBM relaxation has been announced so far under the second option of borrowing from the market.

Economists caution that the Centre's high-handedness in trying to discipline states while not keeping its own end of the GST bargain could further hurt India's economic recovery. Many of them argue that the Centre is in a far better position to mobilise funds than the states. "This is no time to discipline the states," says an economist, requesting anonymity. "States will be forced to cut back capital expenditure and end up borrowing at higher interest rates."

Revenues from taxes account for about 45 per cent of the total revenues of states, and according to an RBI study of state finances, central transfers account for 47.5 per cent of their revenues. Nearly 90 per cent of the tax revenues of states come from taxes on liquor, petroleum products, stamp duty and registration of vehicles. However, the slowdown has hit collections under all these tax heads. With state finances in such a perilous state, "making them borrow rather than giving them money will make their situation even more critical", said the economist quoted above. The Centre might like to reconsider its options. ■

TRINAMOOL CONGRESS

IN THE LEFT LANE

By Romita Datta

On August 5, Debesh Das, a minister in the erstwhile Left Front government in West Bengal, received an unexpected phone call. On the line was a member of Prashant Kishor's Indian Political Action Committee (I-PAC), the organisation tasked by the Trinamool Congress (TMC) with ensuring its victory in the assembly election scheduled early next year. "They began by praising my work in Entally constituency before getting to the point of the phone call that 'PK' would like to meet me. I politely requested them not to disturb me," says the CPI(M) leader.

Lakshmi Kanta Roy, a former two-term CPI(M) legislator from Dhupguri in Cooch Behar also received feelers from I-PAC recently. The caller, says Roy, expressed admiration for his simple lifestyle, including his tin-roofed home in Jaldhaka and said the TMC needed such politicians to shore up its electoral prospects. "I was promised an assembly election ticket and, eventually, many other things. But I told them not to call me again," says Roy.

These are not random moves but part of a concerted effort by Kishor to beef up the TMC ranks with strong candidates for the assembly election, where the party faces a serious challenge from the BJP. In the 2019 Lok Sabha election, the BJP won 18 of Bengal's 42 seats, vaulting from two seats in 2014 and finishing just four behind the TMC. If this is any indicator of which way the wind is blowing in Bengal, Mamata Banerjee and her party have a do-or-die battle at hand.

Among the 12 Left politicians approached by the TMC so far are also Banamali Roy, a five-time CPI(M) MLA from Dhupguri, and Mamata Ray, a former legislator from the same constituency. "They introduced themselves on the phone as members of an NGO, the Prashant Kisan Sangstha. It was only when they came over on August 9 that I learnt they were working for Prashant Kishor and the chief minister. They suggested [that if I joined the TMC], my financial problems would be over and I would be able to afford a car and a better house," claims Mamata Ray, who lives in a modest bamboo-fenced house and moves about in an e-rickshaw.

The TMC, though, denies baiting politicians from rival parties and insists it's merely playing to 'popular demand'. "I cannot say who made the first move, but if people are willing to join us, how can we sit back and do nothing?" asks Partha Chatterjee, party spokesperson and state education minister.

While the TMC denies wooing Left leaders, several of those approached claim they were offered tickets and even ministerial berths

The TMC's search for candidates with a clean record couldn't have been more timely. Cyclone Amphan and the Covid lockdown have left the Mamata Banerjee government exposed to allegations of widespread corruption in relief and rehabilitation work, including the supply of free foodgrains to the poor. Last year, a row had erupted over poor beneficiaries allegedly being forced to bribe local TMC leaders to access central and state government grants. "In rural Bengal, the TMC has become synonymous with corruption and extortion. The BJP appears to have succeeded in creating a perception that the ruling party is interested in serving the interests of its own leaders and workers, and not the commoner," says Prasanta Ray, a Kolkata-based political analyst and former professor of Presidency University. "Even Mamata Banerjee has been forced to admit to corruption and declare that it will not be tolerated."

Political observers feel the TMC will need several high-profile inductions to dispel the notion being created by the BJP that it's a sinking ship. "Voters also judge a political party's strength on the basis of the number of leaders and workers joining it in the run-up to an election. That

perhaps explains the frequent induction exercises being conducted by the TMC," says Kolkata-based political analyst Biswanath Chakraborty, pointing to the spate of defections to the BJP before the last general election. "Sometimes, the entrants are big names or celebrities, but mostly inductees are ground-level workers," he adds.

The TMC recently held such exercises in Barrackpore and Bhatpara in the North 24 Parganas district, the stronghold of TMC leader-turned-BJP MP Arjun Singh. But a prominent TMC minister, speaking on condition of anonymity, described those taken on board as "extras in a film shoot".

Analysts say the TMC is really keen on imports from the Left, and that's because even while the communist parties have seen a massive erosion in their base—their vote share dropped to 7 per cent in the 2019 Lok Sabha election—many of their leaders still have a clean, pro-poor image. Also, Kishor may be betting on Left leaders being open to joining the ruling party in Bengal to revive their political careers. His team has reportedly drawn up a list of 'popular, honest and hardworking' Left leaders on the basis of a survey.

Some Left leaders being wooed by the TMC claim they were offered party posts, assembly election tickets and even ministerial berths. Disapproving of such tactics, a TMC veteran says on condition of anonymity: "Is Prashant Kishor hoping to draw in honest people by using unscrupulous means? This is what happens when the party brings in an outsider to gauge the mood of the people." Kishor, who was hired by Mamata's nephew Abhishek Banerjee in June last year, is making organisational changes in the TMC that have not gone down well with the party's old guard.

Whether or not Left leaders give in to the TMC's overtures, grassroots workers have been joining the party, either forced by ground realities or lured by the promise of a brighter future. At least 300 Left members and sympathisers from Burdwan, North 24 Parganas, South 24 Parganas and Hooghly have joined the TMC in the past six months. The TMC hopes grassroots inductions from the Left will strengthen the party's base at the booth level. In the 2019 Lok Sabha election, a big chunk of the BJP's 40 per cent vote share came from Left supporters. Mamata has often rued this and urged Left leaders to prevent the BJP from breaching their support base.

Kishor's strategy to woo Left leaders goes beyond headcount and support mobilisation. "He is also trying to gauge if Left supporters still see our party as their prime enemy, as they did in the Lok Sabha election and worked to shore up support for the BJP," says a TMC minister. Indeed, a wide section of the Left rank and file had helped the BJP in booth management as the saffron party lacked organisational presence in over 30,000 polling booths. Given this, the TMC could do with some Left hands on the deck. Bengal has 77,000 assembly polling booths and they will need effective manning, both in terms of engaging with voters and ensuring rigging-free voting. "Given all the internal bickering and poaching by the BJP, the TMC cannot afford to rely on its own strength alone. Left cadre and leaders, if they can be won over, would be most handy," says a TMC minister. ■

Illustration by SIDDHANT JUMDE

MASKED CAMARADERIE CM Chouhan with Scindia at the inauguration of a project in Pohri, Shivpuri district, Sept. 12

RAJEEV GUPTA

MADHYA PRADESH BYPOLLS

TWO LEADERS AND AN ELECTION

By Rahul Noronha

Two years is a long time in politics and so in Madhya Pradesh two personalities, pitted against each other in the 2018 assembly election, now find themselves working together. Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan and the BJP back then had Jyotiraditya Scindia firmly in their crosshairs; indeed, the BJP campaign in 2018 revolved around Scindia's princely legacy (read: arrogant) versus Chouhan's *kisan putra* (read: down-to-earth) image. '*Maaf karo maharaj, hamare neta Shivraj*' was the BJP's campaign couplet then, but today the 'Maharaj' and 'Mama' are twin faces of the BJP campaign for byelections in 28 assembly segments. How does the BJP plan to bring these two contrasting political personalities together on the election stage? More importantly, what will a decisive win/ loss for the BJP signal for Scindia and Chouhan?

The dates haven't been announced yet, but both the BJP and the Congress are gearing for a November battle coinciding with the Bihar election. Of the 28 seats, 25 were with the Congress, before these MLAs defected to the BJP, along with Scindia; three seats were vacated on the demise of the incumbents. The Gwalior-Chambal region accounts for 16 seats, and the BJP strategy here is to nullify the opposition campaign on the motives behind the defections. There is talk of substantial sums of money changing hands; a figure is also in circulation and the electorate has latched on to it. Net result: the voters are fully expecting to be courted by these leaders. The fact that 14 of the turncoat MLAs were made ministers also establishes a quid pro quo. "The BJP is claiming the MLAs resigned because the 15-month Congress government only focused on Chhindwara, ex-chief minister Kamal Nath's area, and that other regions of the state were ignored," says political analyst Girija Shankar. "To drive home the point, Chouhan and Scindia have also announced a huge number of development works in the constituencies going to the polls. The message is that the BJP will rectify the wrongs of the Congress," he says.

Scindia, Chouhan and Union agriculture minister Narendra Singh Tomar did a whirlwind tour of constituencies in Shivpuri, Bhind, Morena, Datia, Gwalior and Ashok Nagar districts between September 10 and 13, announcing the new projects. It included a Rs 160 crore dam in Mehgaon in Bhind district, numerous PMGSY (Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana) roads, a Rs 8,000 crore, 450 km Chambal Expressway (now rechristened the Atal Progressway), a Sainik School in Bhind, and an air cargo hub in Dabra, Gwalior. More than 100 big and small projects were announced.

CM Chouhan has also announced that the state government will commemorate Prime Minister Narendra Modi's 70th birthday on September 17 as 'Gareeb Kalyan Pakhwada'. The day will be used to release pending payouts to important political groups, among them certificates to tribals under the Forest Rights Act (FRA), Rs 10,000 interest-free loans to street vendors, money for laptops to students, PM Kisan Yojana dues, and handouts to Chouhan's Sambal Scheme beneficiaries. During the week, 3.7 million new beneficiaries will be added as BPL ration card holders, 175,000 new houses handed over to beneficiaries under the PMAY-G (Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana-Gramin), and milk will be introduced in the diet at anganwadis. An estimated Rs 4,650 crore is also being released to farmers as insurance payment for crop damages in 2019.

Mercifully, the BJP's campaign, at least till now, has refrained from any attempts at polarising the electorate, focusing solely on development even though a section of the party is keen to make the most of the Ayodhya Ram temple 'victory'. A part of the reason for not doing so could be Scindia's presence and that the Gwalior-Chambal region, unlike Malwa, may not respond well to religious issues.

In Gwalior-Chambal, caste will be a major factor. While the BJP has little choice in candidate selection—all 25 defectors were promised tickets as part of the deal—the Congress has space to manoeuvre on the caste front. There is, however, talk about the BJP cadre being asked to support rebel candidates in constituencies where the official party candidate is sure to lose. This move is fraught with risk as it could antagonise Scindia. Political watchers say the BJP may eventually decide against this to avoid complications. To counter this 'disadvantage', the BJP plans to grant tickets on caste lines in Joura and Agar constituencies, two of the seats that fell vacant on the demise of incumbent MLAs.

> **The 'BJP-fication' of ex-Congressmen is not complete. At public meetings in Gwalior-Chambal, leaders who owe their allegiance to Scindia still address him as chief; no particular regard for the party is on display**

The party organisation has been told that voting percentages will be key to ensuring victory. The Sangh will be pressed into service to ensure this. The appointment of RSS man Hitanand Sharma as BJP joint organisational secretary, replacing Atul Rai, should help. Sharma has worked in Guna and Shivpuri and his experience will come in handy. The BJP organisation is also trying to get PM Modi onboard, and though he does not campaign in byelections, there is talk that he may agree since 28 seats are involved.

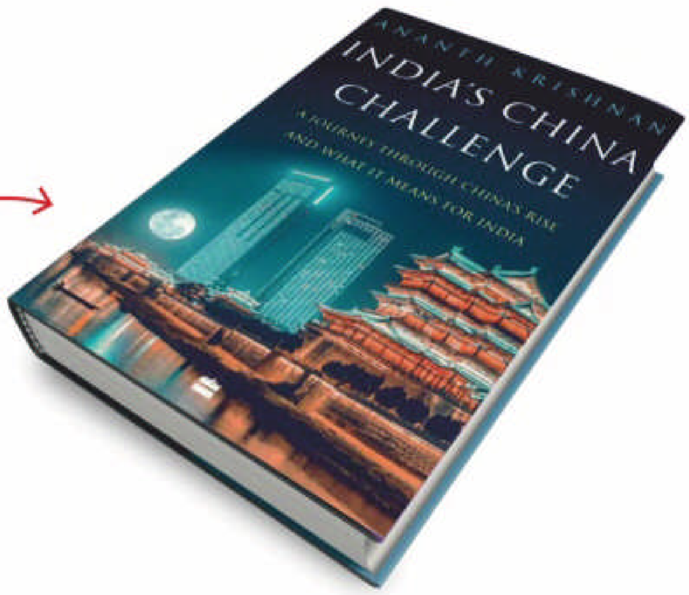
Last week, BJP national general secretary (organisation) B.L. Santhosh visited Bhopal and is learnt to have told the ministers who have been given charge of constituencies that they would lose their cabinet positions if the party lost in these seats. There are also issues at the ground level, especially in coordination between the original BJP workers and the new entrants. The 'BJP-ification' of the Congress leaders and workers isn't complete yet. At many public meetings in the Gwalior-Chambal region, leaders who owe their allegiance to Scindia still address him as their chief, with no particular deference to the BJP. This is not quite the culture of the BJP, where all the talk is about putting the party ahead of the individual.

The party also faces rebellion within its ranks. Veteran BJP leaders such as Jaibhan Singh Pawaiya, Deepak Joshi, Gauri Shankar Shejwar and others have had to sit out this election as the party tickets have been given to the new arrivals. Many BJP insiders are upset at the way their leaders were left out of the cabinet expansion, in which 14 ex-Congress MLAs were accommodated. While organisational channels have helped keep the rebels fairly quiet, some like Satish Sikarwar (the BJP candidate from Gwalior East segment in 2018) have joined the Congress. "An open rebellion is unlikely given that the BJP is in power in the state and the Centre, but there is bound to be some sabotage," says a BJP leader on condition of anonymity.

Success in the bypolls would prove that Chouhan and Scindia's popularity is intact. It will also be a ratification of Scindia's move to make the 25 Congress MLAs resign. Conversely, an adverse outcome could have consequences for both leaders. For one, there are other contenders for the job of MP chief minister. The anti-Chouhan group would use an average poll performance as a reason to demand a change in leadership. If the BJP manages to retain power, but only just about, that too will reflect in the cabinet. The Scindia-heavy ministry will, then, have to be rejigged to accommodate original BJP leaders. There is also his induction into the Union cabinet to consider. Many in the BJP believe Scindia could be a challenger for Chouhan, but that is for the future. Till the outcome of the byelections, their futures are interlinked. ■

BEYOND BORDERS

By Sanjaya Baru



INDIA'S CHINA CHALLENGE: A Journey through China's Rise and What It Means for India
By Ananth Krishnan
HARPERCOLLINS INDIA
₹599; 419 pages

Of all the major nations in the world, India has the smallest number of journalists stationed overseas. Many of them are stringers, not even full-time correspondents. For all its protestations of nationalism, the news-consuming class is quite happy viewing the world through western eyes. While China occupies so much of our mindspace these days, there are only four Indian reporters stationed there, says Ananth Krishnan in his highly readable book written after reporting from Beijing for close to a decade (2009-18).

We are fortunate, though, that the quality of Indian reporters has made up for the quantity. After Pallavi Aiyar's delightful account of life in pre-Xi Jinping China (*Smoke and Mirrors: An Experience of China*, 2008), we now have Krishnan's insightful account of Xi's China. Both Aiyar and Krishnan began their stint learning Mandarin, an essential requirement for a foreign correspondent. Familiarity with the language helps open doors and Krishnan's access is impressive. He manages to speak to important leaders in Beijing as well as common people across China.

Krishnan offers interesting insights into the play of power politics, the workings of the 'workshop of the world', a modernising cultural landscape and the corruption of China's political 'tigers', compared to the 'flies' of Indian babudom. Non-specialists will find his survey of the India-China bilateral relationship useful in understanding the ongoing stand-off in the high Himalayas.

Krishnan has three key messages for all thinking Indians: first, while India and China are equal in population size, are both great civilisational states and were at similar levels of development till the 1980s, in the first two decades of the 21st century, China has taken off and now sees itself as a Great Global Power. It does not view India as an equal and, worse, does not think India will catch up in the near future.

Second, China has an authoritarian state that is run by an increasingly assertive communist party manned entirely by Han Chinese. That said, the Chinese are a lively people, with differing views, desires, aspirations and concerns like any other people. Many are also now turning to religion in search of solace. While governance is still highly decentralised, regional competition and local leaderships spur growth, driven by an increasingly well-educated and enterprising people.

Third, China has problems along its outer reaches—Tibet, Xinjiang and Hong Kong—but it is quite capable of managing these. I agree with Krishnan's assessment that China is unlikely to integrate Taiwan into the communist republic. Taiwan's demography, ethnic composition, democratic politics and society and culture have made it far too independent-minded for easy annexation.

Krishnan's portraits of interesting individuals reinforce the argument about China's internal plurality. Any hope for China's normalisation lies in the full fruition of this plurality. What both Aiyar and Krishnan have buttressed is the need for Indians to have a direct experience of China and be able to relate to the ordinary Chinese even though relations between the two nations are unlikely to improve anytime soon. China has to come to terms with India's rise just as much as India has to come to terms with China's power.

Krishnan believes the Covid pandemic has accentuated a trend towards greater centralisation of power, while at the same time also contributing to growing criticism of the government. In the end, however, it is unlikely to alter the 'course of history', which is the rise of China relative to other powers. However, China's belligerence and attempt to keep India tied down have only encouraged the latter to leverage its relations with other democracies, including the US, Japan, France, Germany, UK, Australia and Canada, while also preserving her relationship with Russia.

In the end, the answer to India's China challenge lies at home. India must not only regain its economic momentum and continue to pursue all-round economic and human development, it must also retain its credentials as a secular, plural and liberal democracy. The world has to want a New India to overcome the China challenge. ■

Sanjaya Baru *was media advisor to former prime minister Manmohan Singh and is author of* The Accidental Prime Minister

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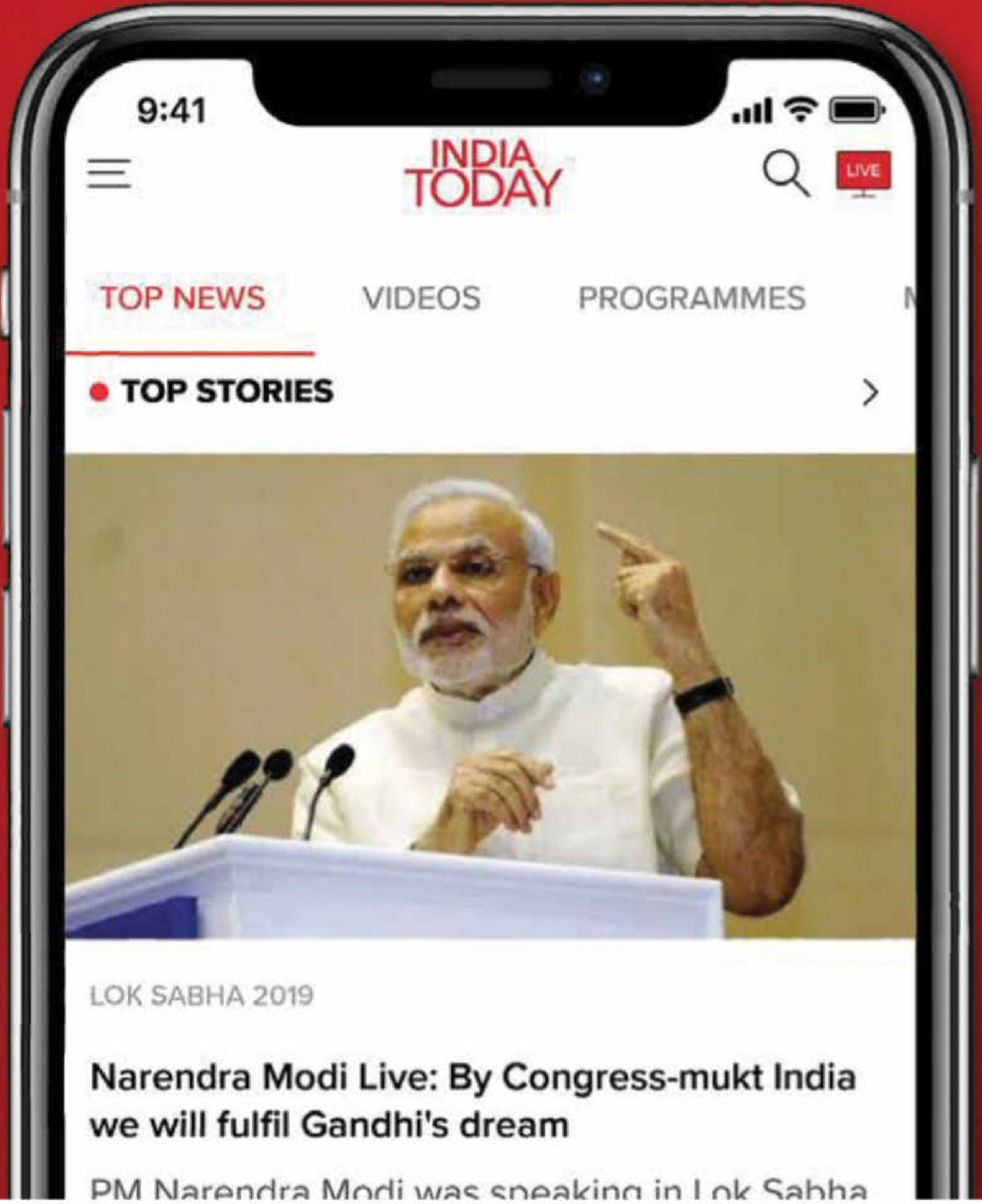

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TRILOCHAN SASTRY

GUEST COLUMN

SINGLE ELECTORAL ROLLS, ANYONE?

The Indian electoral rolls are once again in the news. The government wants to prepare a single roll for national, state and local elections to municipalities and panchayats. Currently, many states have separate rolls. One is maintained by the Central Election Commission (CEC) and used for the Lok Sabha and state assembly elections; the other is maintained by the respective State Election Commissions (SECs) and used for local elections. The issue has been discussed for a few decades; some Commissions have recommended it; a few states have already done it.

In principle, this is a good idea. The problem lies in the details. Electoral rolls of either type are not fully correct. There are errors of commission, when names that should not be there are included; there are errors of omission, where names are missing. It is impossible to estimate this, but pilot field surveys show that in urban areas these errors could be quite large. Both the CEC and SECs are constantly working on removing these errors and some progress has been made.

The recent pandemic has thrown up yet another variable to contend with—the millions of migrants. Where do they vote? Typically, elections are held in the summer when schools are closed. This is also the peak time for seasonal migration, for lack of agricultural work at this time of year. There are a large number of students who study in other cities and towns. There is also a sizeable white-collar urban migrant population, who go to other places for jobs. There has been some discussion of remote voting for all these groups. The administrative arrangements need to be worked out. However, voter ID fraud cannot be ignored, but it is beyond the issue of single electoral rolls.

The stated purpose of this exercise is to hold simultaneous elections to the Lok Sabha, state assemblies and local elections. There is some election or the other almost every year in some part of the country, including by-elections, when seats fall vacant on the death of a representative or when s/he defects. Many states do not hold local elections at all for many years. Also, what do we do if a government falls? Several practical, legal and constitutional issues have to be sorted out.

Ignoring all this, the issue of single electoral rolls can still be considered. Most voters are not concerned about it as long as their name is included. Whether they actually vote on the day is another matter. There are two issues that are linked to this. One is the use of technology, especially the biometric ID Aadhaar, or something similar. The other is the CAA and NRC issue. Will people with voter IDs and names on electoral rolls be left out of the NRC register? Or vice versa? Will this end up in courts with aggrieved persons and groups asking for justice? Privacy and data security are also important. The information sits on the cloud and can potentially be hacked. Could an enemy country or some group with vested interests use this to their advantage? We already hear reports of this in other countries.

We also need to ask a simple question. The country is still facing massive health and economic upheavals due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Earlier, we had groups of people protesting for or against the CAA and NRC. In this situation, even if we decide that single voter rolls are worth it, we need to think whether this is the right time. Ironing out all the problems, some of which have been outlined earlier, will take time, money and effort. Implementation glitches may lead to legal challenges or public protests. At a national level, some legal or even constitutional changes may be necessary to persuade states to mandatorily follow a common electoral roll. Simultaneous elections will require political management. Is this the most pressing issue of the day? Aren't resources of time, money and the government bureaucracy better utilised trying to shepherd the nation out of the biggest crisis we face today? ■

Even if we decide that single voter rolls are worth it, this is not the right time to discuss their merits

TRILOCHAN SASTRY *is founder chairman of the Association of Democratic Reforms and professor, IIM Bangalore*

Illustration by TANMOY CHAKRABORTY

ITC: Agility in Adversity, Synergy in Diversity, Compassionate in Crisis

109th Annual General Meeting, ITC Limited, September 4, 2020

Enduring Value

ADDRESS BY CHAIRMAN, MR SANJIV PURI

The untamed spread of the COVID-19 virus, over the past few months, has caused unimaginable crisis across the globe. Never before, in recent history, have we encountered a challenge of this dimension that has so profoundly impacted almost every human on this planet.

Today, I would like to first express our deepest respect for the country's doctors and health care workers who have endured immense hardship to fight such a formidable battle. We would also like to convey our sincerest appreciation to the thousands in Government, Army, Administration, Police and many others across the country who have toiled relentlessly to fight many a battle amidst extremely difficult circumstances. The Governments at the Centre and States have responded with speed and laudable resolve to provide extensive support to the distressed. We join the Nation in expressing our deepest appreciation for their unparalleled service to the country.

Black swan events like this pandemic bring in their wake, crises of unprecedented proportions as also opportunities like never before. An opportunity to reimagine the future and rewire thought, strategy and action to build a path to a safer, healthier and secure tomorrow. Such disruptive events not only test resilience and adaptive capacity but can also unleash forces of innovation and creativity to shape a more sustainable and inclusive future.

> “The Government, led by the vision of the Hon'ble Prime Minister, played an admirable role in dealing with the health crisis, extending timely relief to the vulnerable and in announcing the ₹20 lakh crores special package.”

There is no doubt that the task ahead will be daunting. Though the Indian economy will face multi-dimensional challenges in the short term, it is certainly reassuring that our country remains one of the major economies in the world with huge potential.

This strength of conviction and hope in the country's future is also premised in the laudable manner that India has fought back. The Government, led by the vision of the Hon'ble Prime Minister, played an admirable role in dealing with the health crisis, extending timely relief to the vulnerable and in announcing the ₹ 20 lakh crores special package. The wide ranging reforms, accelerated infrastructural development and policy interventions to shape competitive “Make in India” supply chains will augur well for the economy and is expected to spur growth over time. The transformative reforms announced in the agricultural sector have also been path-breaking. They hold the promise to foster a new era of growth for farmers and rural India, that comprise nearly half of the country's workforce, besides triggering a virtuous cycle of consumption, investment and employment.

It is today even more imperative that business and industry, as large economic organs of society, act with compassion and embed societal value creation and particularly livelihood generation in their strategies to rebuild the future. At ITC, that is indeed the spirit which has guided our philosophy of Responsible Competitiveness embodied in our credo of Nation First – Sab Saath Badhein.

ITC: Triple Bottom Line Highlights

Your Company has over the years built a robust portfolio of synergistic businesses and enterprise assets that have lent invaluable strength during this crisis.

Your Company's presence across agriculture, manufacturing and services enables it to make a larger contribution to the Nation. ITC is today one of the top 3 Indian corporates in the private sector in terms of Contribution to the Exchequer. I am sure you will also take pride that your Company is the only enterprise in the world of comparable dimensions to be carbon positive, water positive and solid waste recycling positive for more than a decade now. ITC has been ranked No. 1 globally amongst its peers and No. 3 overall on ESG performance in the Food Products industry by Sustainalytics, a renowned global ESG rating company. Your Company has also been rated 'AA' by MSCI-ESG - the highest among global tobacco companies. This year, your Company's Paperboards unit at Kovai became the 1st facility in India and the 2nd in the world to be awarded the Alliance for Water Stewardship Platinum-level certification - the highest recognition for water stewardship in the world. It is a matter of deep satisfaction that your Company today supports over 6 million livelihoods.

ITC: The Response to the Pandemic

As the pandemic unfolded, your Company responded with agility, resilience and compassion to adapt to the new normal. A COVID Contingency Fund of ₹215 crores was set up to address the needs of the distressed. Together with local authorities, a combination of cooked meals, food and hygiene products were also distributed across 25 States and Union Territories. To ensure liquidity in the hands of farmers, your Company's procurement of agri produce was intensified. ITC has worked with the Government's MGNREGA programme to create 7.6 lakh person days of work in just 45 days. ITC also extended financial support to its supply chain partners for obtaining a COVID-19 Insurance Cover for their associates, covering hospitalisation and diagnostic expenses.

Your Company ramped up production capacity and resumed distribution in record time, with extreme focus on safety protocols. Over 180 factories manufacturing essential products in Foods, Personal Care and Hygiene as well as Paperboards and Packaging were progressively made operational. More than 85% of your Company's WDs and associated warehouses were made operational within 10 days of the lockdown, servicing millions of consumers with highly motivated frontline teams. Responding with agility to emerging consumer needs, your Company fast tracked the design, development and go-to-market strategy of innovative products and services. The Savlon portfolio was augmented with differentiated offerings including disinfectant sprays, advanced 'Hexa' sanitisers, soaps, bodywash, germ protection wipes and so on. Other innovative products include 'Nimwash' - with 100% natural action for washing vegetables and fruits, B Natural Plus range of Immunity beverages, Bingo! range of new snacks, a wide array of ITC Master Chef frozen foods and a variety of Farmland frozen vegetables to cater to the increasing demand for safe and high quality products. The perfume manufacturing facility in Manpura, Himachal Pradesh was repurposed on a war footing. Manufacture of ITC's hygiene products like Savlon sanitisers was ramped up by 275 times to cater to the surge in demand.

> “A COVID Contingency Fund of ₹ 215 crores was set up to address the needs of the distressed.”

To reach millions of consumers confined to their homes, your Company was a first mover in entering into collaborations with companies such as Dominos, Swiggy, Zomato, Dunzo and Amway to leverage their direct to home reach. The innovative 'ITC Store on Wheels' initiative was launched to service residential complexes.

It was immensely inspiring to witness the extraordinary efforts put in by your Company's frontline warriors amidst such adversity. I would like to place on record today my deepest appreciation to our dedicated Team ITC, on behalf of the Board.

ITC: Reimagining the Future

The pandemic has caused unprecedented disruption to economic activity the world over, propelling the already slowing global economy into a recessionary shock. World output is estimated to contract by 5 – 7%. Estimates for the Indian economy indicate a substantial contraction in 2020-21, with several sectors experiencing severe demand destruction. This is likely to shrink livelihood opportunities considerably causing a severe stress on consumer spends. Such a situation undoubtedly calls for a strategic response focusing on the vigorous pursuit of value-accretive opportunities leveraging your Company's institutional strengths on the one hand whilst driving thrift, cost optimisation and conservation of cash on the other. However, the universal question today is: How do we reimagine the future not only to survive and revive, but also to thrive in the new normal? To my mind, Reimagining the Future will encompass 3 distinct phases which will co-exist in the journey ahead. First, a 'Survival' phase as corporates brace to manage the current crisis. Second, a 'Reboot' phase as businesses align to the new normal with certain segments experiencing demand destruction, some new trends emerging whilst several pre-crisis trends gain accelerated pace. Third, as the crisis ebbs, corporates will have to gear up for the 'next normal' with some trends moderating, some remaining at an elevated level, certain segments witnessing recovery, whilst new opportunities and industry dynamics get constantly redefined.

Building Competitiveness & Resilience

I am deeply convinced that the future will belong to purposeful enterprises who will constantly build competitiveness with agility and innovation to respond speedily to external shocks and emerge even stronger from the crisis. It is this compelling strategic response that drives your Company to strengthen organisational vitality in a manner that is future-ready, fosters extreme competitiveness, whilst contributing to the vision of an Atmanirbhar Bharat.

This Vitality is today manifest in the robust eco-system of your Company where differentiated products and services can move from the drawing board to the market in record speed; where trusted world-class Indian brands have been built and nurtured; where supply chains can be realigned to react swiftly to disruptions; where timely partnerships can be orchestrated; where extreme focus is provided to sweating assets and getting more out of less; where critical infrastructure and relationships nurtured across the value chain can be repurposed to sharpen competitive advantage; where sustainability is embedded in strategy and action to make larger societal value creation an integral part of business outcomes; and where dedicated talent is inspired by a larger sense of purpose.

Your Company's investments in state-of-the-art Integrated Manufacturing facilities with a distributed footprint, that support indigenous supply-chains, enabled swift realignment and resilience to changing circumstances. Such close-to-market factories ensure product freshness, improve market responsiveness, enable cost-optimisation and provide heightened focus on product hygiene, safety and quality.

Building resilience and responsible competitiveness is integral to your Company's DNA and a strategic driver of growth creating enduring shareholder value. The current pandemic reinforces the need for resilience, which will continue to be an area of strategic priority for your Company.

Purposeful Innovation for Consumers

Global research today points to the consumers' increasing demand for products and services that focus on health, wellness, safety and hygiene. Consumers continue to prefer trusted brands. There is a growing preference for organic, naturals and fresh products though consumers also seek indulgence, comfort eating and even resort to 'revenge' consumption. Frozen food, ready-to-eat or cook meals score high on convenience, during these trying times. The home has now become the epicenter of life, substituting dining out, entertainment and socialising. Discretionary spends are down, and there is evidence of value-seeking behaviour. There is a shift to larger basket purchases, large value packs with infrequent shopping frequency. Digital shopping surged exponentially even as neighbourhood grocery stores emerged as the lifeline for essential supplies.

Your Company's innovation engine is at work 24x7 to develop future-ready products. This was leveraged by your Company to rapidly introduce over 40 high quality, first-to-market products and variants during the pandemic to meet emerging consumer demand. While these science-led innovations witnessed encouraging consumer response, the surge in demand for your Company's portfolio of food and hygiene products required a substantive scale-up in capacity contributing to the robust performance evident in the Q1 results.

Reimagining Digital Transformation

The pandemic accelerated manifold the transition to digitalisation that was already moving at high velocity.

Accelerated digital transformation is integral to your Company's future-ready strategy and is increasingly being harnessed to enhance competitive advantage. New technologies such as Industry 4.0, Artificial Intelligence, Big Data, industrial Internet of Things (IoT) and Machine Learning are being deployed by all Businesses, including your Company's supply chain and logistics to enhance operational effectiveness. Substantial investments have been made in the creation of a digital eco-system to drive smart manufacturing, product quality, traceability and supply chain agility, amongst others. This accelerated digital journey has begun to demonstrate appreciable outcomes.

Your Company's Marketing Command Centre - 'Sixth Sense' - leverages cloud-technology, cutting-edge social-media engagement tools and a digital marketing & analytics platform to drive contextual communication and product development rapidly. The Centre has today developed into a real time repository on market trends. Based on the insights gained, several digital campaigns have been rolled out and product variants developed. For example, social media trends like Dalgona coffee were leveraged to deepen consumer engagement for ITC's Sunbean Beaten Caffe and introduce a new variant in a long shelf life ambient format.

Taking its digital interventions further, your Company swiftly launched an online ordering system for retailers to address the surge in demand during the pandemic. Enhanced presence across e-commerce platforms led to accelerated growth in sales and marketing of ITC's FMCG products. Your Company's wholly-owned subsidiary, ITC Infotech has developed appreciable domain-led expertise in emerging areas of digital and automation solutions and is your Company's strategic partner in its journey of digital transformation. The rapid pace of digital adoption world-wide offers immense promise for this business. The pandemic saw an explosive adoption of digital tools and platforms, which is poised to redefine business operations and consumer engagement significantly. Your Company continues to invest in building its digital enterprise capacity and capabilities to stay ahead of the curve and shape formidable strengths for the future.

Rediscovering Sustainability

Even before the outbreak, the world was in the throes of a sustainability crisis with increasing frequency of extreme weather events, climate change induced vulnerabilities, poverty and hunger challenges as well as the need to create livelihoods for millions of youth. The pandemic aggravated this situation by causing havoc to livelihoods across nations. India will mirror this global trend with the crisis severely impacting livelihoods across many sectors. Compounding this is the threat of climate change, which can no longer be ignored given that it leads the top 5 long-term risks in the Global Risk Report 2020 of the World Economic Forum. As I have often emphasized, it is imperative that businesses, as an integral part of society, embed sustainability in its core strategy and play a transformative role in securing the future of generations to come.

> “It is imperative that businesses, as an integral part of society, embed sustainability in its core strategy and play a transformative role in securing the future of generations to come.”

Your Company's vision to serve a larger national purpose has inspired unique business models that build substantial economic, environmental and social capital for the Nation. Over the years, competitive and inclusive value chains have been built which are anchored by ITC's world-class brands. ITC's Social Investment initiatives build capacities for tomorrow through extensive vocational training, women empowerment programmes and supplementary education. In addition, the Company's extensive interventions in agriculture help in empowering millions of farmers. Your Company's superior environmental benchmarks in all its operations, creation of large forestry and water resources as also a renewable energy portfolio accounting for over 41% of total energy consumption makes ITC an icon of environmental stewardship.

Several innovations, backed by R&D, have led to path-breaking initiatives. For example, your Company's Paperboards as well as Packaging businesses have introduced several innovative sustainable packaging solutions. These include the recyclable barrier board 'Filo' series as an innovative substitute for single-use plastics in the food service segment and the biodegradable 'Omega Series' as an alternative to plastic coated containers and cups, and so on. Your Company has also pioneered a replicable Multi-layered Plastic waste management model in Pune, providing an end-to-end solution for converting such waste into commercial products based on technical knowhow of the ITC Life Sciences & Technology Centre.

Your Company has set ambitious sustainability goals for the future. ITC aspires to meet 50% of its total energy consumption from renewable sources by 2030. Your Company intends to sequester over four times the CO_2

emissions from its operations as well as create rainwater harvesting potential equivalent to over five times its net water consumption over the next decade. As part of its waste management programme, the Company aims to ensure that 100% of its packaging is reusable, recyclable or compostable in the next decade.

Building Next Generation Agriculture

Nearly two-thirds of the country's population reside in rural India, with almost half of the total workforce dependent on agriculture. Despite the potential in India's agri-sector, farmers continue to face challenges of productivity, depleting water resources and effective market linkages. Aggravating these challenges is the threat of climate change, as rightly highlighted in the recent RBI Annual Report. Compounding these challenges are the large wastages in perishables, and insignificant value addition in agri-products which impact the farmer's earning potential. It is therefore critical that the latent power of Next Generation Agriculture is unleashed to raise farmer incomes and drive a virtuous cycle of consumption, investment and employment whilst insulating the farmers from the threat of climate change by the large-scale promotion of sustainable agricultural practices. The recent path-breaking reforms provide an unparalleled opportunity to transform agriculture.

In the true spirit of Atmanirbhar Bharat, your Company has, over several decades, engaged deeply with farmers to address these multi-dimensional challenges and co-create sustainable solutions to raise rural incomes. Powered by ITC's celebrated e-Choupal, and your Company's social investments, large-scale interventions have been implemented to enable climate-smart agriculture, enhance productivity, promote value addition, expand market access and exports. To future-proof agriculture and combat climate change, ITC's Water Stewardship programmes have brought soil and moisture conservation to over 1 million acres whilst initiatives for demand-side management of water that enable 'more crop per drop' cover more than 2 lakh acres across 6 states, reducing consumption by as much as 20 to 45%.

Your Company's Agri-Business lends distinctive competitive advantage to its Foods Businesses with superior agri-sourcing that focuses on identity preservation, traceability and certification, as well as lower transaction costs. Today, your Company is one of India's largest integrated agri business enterprises with a segment revenue of over ₹10,200 crores. It is also a significant exporter of value-added agri-products and the largest procurer of wheat in the private sector. Your Company sources over 3 million tonnes of agri-products from 225 districts in 22 States. Several competitive agri value chains have been assiduously built over time to benefit farmers. The Wheat and Spices Value Chain is anchored by the Aashirvaad brand as well as exports. The Potato Value Chain is driven by ITC's Bingo! Snacks; the Fruits & Vegetables Value Chain is powered by ITC's B Natural juices, Farmland and ITC Master Chef Frozen Foods and the Dairy Value Chain leverages Aashirvaad Svasti dairy products and Sunfeast Wonderz milk-based beverages. These vibrant value chains provide consumers high quality products whilst generating substantial livelihoods. Your Company's increasing engagement across the perishables value chain, including value-added products in frozen, purees and dehydrated formats will also spur investments in climate controlled infrastructure and food processing.

Your Company is well poised to expand its horizons in the agricultural sector. The transformative agri-reforms will also open up new opportunities. These measures are likely to enhance operational efficiencies and accelerate your Company's journey towards building a robust and future-ready Value-Added Agri Products portfolio catering to both the B2B and B2C channels. Your Company is stepping up farmer engagement in wheat, potato, chillies and fruits & vegetables through a Crop Value Chain Cluster model to connect small farmers to markets. The Company expects to support nearly 3000 FPOs with more than a million farmers across 24 crop value chain clusters in 21 states, shaping competitive agri value chains and enhancing farmer incomes. These value chains will be anchored by ITC's large investments in food processing, its vibrant brands as well as exports.

Enabling Future-ready Innovation

Innovation is an elixir of growth that continuously builds competitiveness and strengthens resilience in times of crisis. Your Company's deep R&D capabilities are an invaluable asset enabling it to seize emerging opportunities. With more than 350 highly qualified scientists, LSTC has set up futuristic Centres of Excellence in Biosciences, Agrisciences and Materials and has filed over 900 patents. Your Company also engages with the start-up ecosystem to gain insights from their vibrant innovative capabilities, and where appropriate, is open to making investments.

> “It is ITC's vision to empower 10 million farmers in India multiplying livelihoods that will benefit over 50 million people.”

The advanced scientific platforms in health, hygiene and immunity lend a competitive edge to your Company's consumer products and in recent times, also enabled an accelerated response to the pandemic. In addition to the differentiated range of Savlon products mentioned earlier, other innovations developed by LSTC include B Natural Plus beverage, Aashirvaad Svasti Fortified Milk and Ghee, Sunfeast Digestive Veda Marie with goodness of Fibre & Ayurvedic herbs, Fortified YiPPee noodles with 5 vital nutrients and so on. Your Company is working on multiple value propositions in the areas of functional foods & nutrition. The continued effort is to develop products with lower sodium and sugar as also to enrich & fortify them with value-added nutrients and ingredients such as probiotics, prebiotics, fibres, nuts, seeds and so on. Your Company's FMCG products like Mangaldeep agarbattis have also innovated with a "Lo Smoke" variant that emits 80% lesser smoke, whilst ESPB continuously works with LSTC to create superior writing experiences.

Developing Entrepreneurial Talent

These times of crisis bring to the fore the critical role that inspired talent plays in building resilience of enterprises that are built to last. Your Company believes in nurturing a talented pool of 'proneurs' – entrepreneurial professionals who operate with a start-up mindset but with the crucial advantage of ITC's institutional resources.

The 'proneurial' mindset, adaptive capacity and deep commitment of your Company's distributed leadership together with the inspiration to serve a larger national purpose formed the fulcrum of the resilience demonstrated during these difficult times, and will continue to be its strength in the years to come.

ITC: In Support of Atmanirbhar Bharat

Your Company's superordinate goal to serve larger national priorities is enshrined in its credo of Nation First – Sab Saath Badhein. The vision to create multiple drivers of future-ready businesses, competitive and inclusive value chains that retain larger value in India, is deeply aligned to the Prime Minister's clarion call for an 'Atmanirbhar Bharat'.

> "ITC's vision to create multiple drivers of future-ready businesses, competitive and inclusive value chains that retain larger value in India, is deeply aligned to the Prime Minister's clarion call for an *'Atmanirbhar Bharat'*."

Your Company is recognised as a pioneer in enabling agricultural transformation. Following the success of ITC's 'Baareh Mahine Hariyali' programme aligned to the Government's 'Doubling Farmers' Income' vision, we are now ready to implement e-Choupal 4.0 at scale and bring the benefits of the digital revolution to empower farmers even more effectively. This digital platform, designed as a crop agnostic integrated solution framework will synergistically aggregate technologies like remote sensing, precision farming, drone-based services, quality assaying, e-marketplace and many others. It is now ITC's vision to empower 10 million farmers in India multiplying livelihoods that will benefit over 50 million people.

Your Company's large afforestation initiative covering over 8,00,000 acres not only enables competitive fibre sourcing for its Paperboards Business, but has also generated 147 million person days of employment for marginal farmers. Your Company has also invested in an indigenous agarbatti bamboo value chain to contribute to import substitution and retain larger value in the country. It is estimated that domestic cultivation of bamboo for agarbattis, by substituting imports, can generate over 22 million person days of employment per year. Towards this, the Government's recent policy interventions to promote indigenous bamboo cultivation will go a long way in generating gainful livelihoods. Your Company is already sourcing bamboo for its Mangaldeep brand and promoting nurseries in North-East India, many of which are run by women.

Your Company's large-scale Social Investment programme enhances livelihood generating capacity and enriches environmental resources. Over 77 public-private-people partnerships have been forged with State Governments and public institutions to benefit rural communities. Your Company in collaboration with NITI Aayog has trained 15 lakh farmers in 27 backward districts of 8 states under the Aspirational Districts programme covering 15 crops. The results have been heartening with productivity increasing significantly by 53% and net farmer incomes increasing between 33% to 100%. Over 74,000 sustainable livelihoods have been generated for women, more than 81,500 youth have benefitted from ITC's vocational training initiatives and around 7,75,000 children have received supplementary education. Over 1.8 million animals have been covered through the livestock development initiative.

Your Company's portfolio of world-class Indian brands enables retention of larger value within the country, in alignment to the call for 'Vocal for Local'. Supporting the manufacture of these high quality products, are the 'Make in India' investments in state-of-the-art ICMLs, and in India's largest Paperboards facilities that contribute to the Nation's modern industrial infrastructure creating livelihoods across the value chain. The Company also promotes local entrepreneurship across states in manufacturing ITC's diverse products. Your Company has also created some of the most iconic properties to enrich India's tourism landscape.

The creation and ownership of intellectual property is critical for a country's progress. When such intellectual capital is manifest in successful Indian trademarks, that can win against globally reputed brands, it serves as a force multiplier for larger value creation for the country apart from being a badge of national honour. Your Company's endeavour to create winning Indian trademarks aims to build such intellectual capital and larger value for the country.

In Conclusion

Your Company is today at an important juncture as the investments made in the past to build the diverse businesses demonstrate even larger promise to create sustained value for our shareholders and the Nation. Your Company's agility, compassionate action and adaptive capabilities during these trying circumstances demonstrate its timeless and enduring strengths. Undoubtedly, the short-term will be immensely challenging as the crisis plays out its course. However, we remain optimistic that your Company's focus on top strategic priorities and a superordinate national purpose will continue to create larger value for the country and its stakeholders.

As I conclude, I would like to place on record my gratitude to all our partners and associates, who have bravely stood with us in serving the country in these difficult times. I take pride in ITC's dedicated and committed talent, who have left no stone unturned to take the Company to greater heights. On behalf of the Board, may I thank you, our valuable shareholders, for your encouragement through the year.

My best wishes to you and your families. Stay safe, stay healthy.

This is an extract of Chairman's AGM address. For details, please visit www.itcportal.com. For an e-booklet of the address, please email ITC's Corporate Communications Department at ccd@itc.in

Should India Make Cannabis LEGAL?

Given its widespread use and the ancient and well-established culture of marijuana consumption in this country, it's time for a conversation on decriminalising the drug

BY SONALI ACHARJEE

In the first week of September, in a sensational twist to the Sushant Singh Rajput death case, the Narcotics Control Bureau (NCB) arrested the late actor's girlfriend Rhea Chakraborty, her brother Showik and 10 others for the alleged possession, transportation and purchase of ganja (weed) and charas (hash), all derivatives of the cannabis plant. In its charge-sheet, the NCB says it has recovered 59 grams of weed and five grams of a dark brown substance suspected to be hash from three suspects so far. The quantity recovered is far less than the 1 kilo specified as 'small quantity' under the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances or NDPS Act, 1985. As Suhas Gokhale, former chief of the Azad Maidan unit of Mumbai's anti-narcotics cell, declared two days after Rhea's arrest, "A sadhu's chillum holds more marijuana than what she is being convicted of."

Delhi
is third on the list of 120 cities in the world in terms of weed consumption; Mumbai is sixth

31 million
Indians consumed cannabis in 2018, of which 13 million used weed and hash

7.2 million
were 'problem users'; 2.5 million 'dependent users'

New Delhi could raise up to
Rs 725 crore ($101.2 million)
a year if cannabis was taxed at the same rate as cigarettes

Figures are estimates
Source: Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment; ABCD Cannabis World Price Index study

Indeed, cannabis consumption is common across the country and does not attract the kind of stigma attached to other narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances being consumed illegally in India. In a 2019 study commissioned by the social justice and empowerment ministry, 31 million people in India were reported to have consumed a cannabis product in the past year, of which 13 million had used weed and hash. Cannabis consumption was higher in Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, Sikkim, Chhattisgarh and Delhi than the national average. Based on the annual figures held by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNoDC), a 2018 study by German data firm ABCD placed Delhi third on the list of 120 cities with the highest consumption of cannabis, ahead of Los Angeles, Chicago and London. Mumbai was sixth.

In fact, in the past few years, there has been a growing clamour by non-governmental organisations to legalise the recreational use of cannabis, as other countries have done. On November 7, 2019, the Delhi High Court sought the government's stand on one such petition filed by the Bengaluru-based advocacy non-profit, the Great Legalisation Movement India Trust. The organisation, founded in 2014, wants cannabis removed from the NDPS Act. The legalisation of marijuana, the organisation believes, can help create jobs, battle stress, improve human concentration, resolve medical problems and provide sustainable agricultural incomes, among other things. Cannabis, the petition argued, is integral to the country's cultural fabric; its criminalisation leads to needless harassment and stigma.

Given this widespread prevalence of cannabis consumption and calls for its decriminalisation, the NCB arrests in the Rajput case have triggered a furious debate across the country on whether the agency's enthusiasm was misplaced or even hypocritical. Going by the logic of Rhea's prosecution, cannabis legalisation advocates say, thousands who smoke weed and hash openly during the Kumbh Mela or on Shivratri should be arrested. Defending their action, a top NCB source said that while cannabis use has been widespread in India, its consumption of late has gone up, as have the dangers associated with it. "It has become serious in the sense that every strata of the population is into it—poor, middle-class or rich," he says. "Illegal imports of the weed from US or Canada have become popular among the upper echelons of society." Denying that the agency was being vindictive against Chakraborty, the source said, "We are looking at the problem from a professional point of view. Parties where drugs are being misused have become common in Bollywood and other places. By investigating such

SMOKE & MIRRORS

The NDPS Act, 1985, regards products derived from the flower and fruit of the cannabis plant as illegal and punishable by jail terms and fines

Graphics by TANMOY CHAKRABORTY

THE HIGH

Cannabis has over 400 compounds. THC or tetrahydrocannabinol is an active compound of cannabis which is responsible for producing psychoactive sensations. CBD or cannabidiol is another compound which counters the effect of THC. For greater highs, products are often altered to have higher levels of THC and lower levels of CBD.

THE LAW

The Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act, 1985, defines cannabis as the flower or fruit of the cannabis plant out of which the resin has not been extracted. Seeds and leaves are not included. The act deems 'production, manufacture, possession, sale, purchase, transport, inter-state import or export or use' of cannabis as illegal and punishable depending upon quantity and product.

CANNABIS: ITS MOST POPULAR FORMS IN INDIA AND WHAT THE LAW SAYS ABOUT THEM

Ganja or Weed

THE PRODUCT: Also known as marijuana, pot, grass, Mary Jane, it is a mix of the dried flowers, stems, seeds and leaves of the cannabis plant
THE PRICE: Weed dust can cost as little as Rs 50, otherwise prices vary with quality. Ten grams of average quality weed costs Rs 100-250 in Delhi.
THE LAW: Six-month prison term for 1 kg ganja; up to 10 years for 1-20 kg, 10-20 years for over 20 kg. Fines vary from Rs 10,000 to Rs 2 lakh.

Charas or Hashish

THE PRODUCT: A potent form of cannabis, hashish is made by collecting and compressing the fine growth on cannabis plants, that have a sticky resin
THE PRICE: In Delhi, 10 grams of homemade hash can cost upward of Rs 1,000
THE LAW: Possession of quantity less than 1 kg carries six-month jail term. Anything above invites a jail term of 10-20 years.

Bhang

THE PRODUCT: A paste of cannabis leaves and seeds often consumed in a milk-based drink. The fat in the milk improves absorption of THC, leading to an instant, often stronger, high.
THE PRICE: Rs 150 upwards for a glass in Delhi
THE LAW: Since bhang does not use the flowers or resin of cannabis, it is not within the NDPS Act's purview. But laws to regulate consumption vary in each state. In most states, it is legally sold only at government-licensed shops.

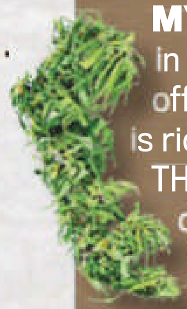
Marijuana Meals

THE PRODUCTS: Hash brownies, cheese, coffee, salt, pizza sauce and even dried noodles are popular cannabis-laced products. Usually made with oil extracted from weed and available at various cafes in marijuana-growing regions.
THE PRICE: Different for different items
THE LAW: Since it is not easy to detect marijuana in food products, prosecution too is difficult

The Cannabis Connoisseur's Collection

MALANA CREAM: A hash made from heirloom cannabis grown in this remote area of the Parvati Valley. THC levels range between 30 and 40 per cent, making it a prized product. It costs upwards of Rs 3,000 in Delhi for a packet of 10 grams.

IDUKKI GOLD: Also known as Kerala Gold, the grass is obtained from hybrid Indian and Amsterdam strains of the cannabis plant. Locals say the original strain has vanished and products sold today are new variations. It usually has 8 per cent THC level. While this may seem low, the product also has almost no CBD, resulting in a stronger high. It costs upwards of Rs 2,500 for 10 grams in Delhi.



MYSORE MANGO: Grown in Karnataka,the weed gives off the aroma of mangoes. It is rich in cannabis resin with a THC level of 18 per cent, and costs upwards of Rs 3,000 for 10 grams.

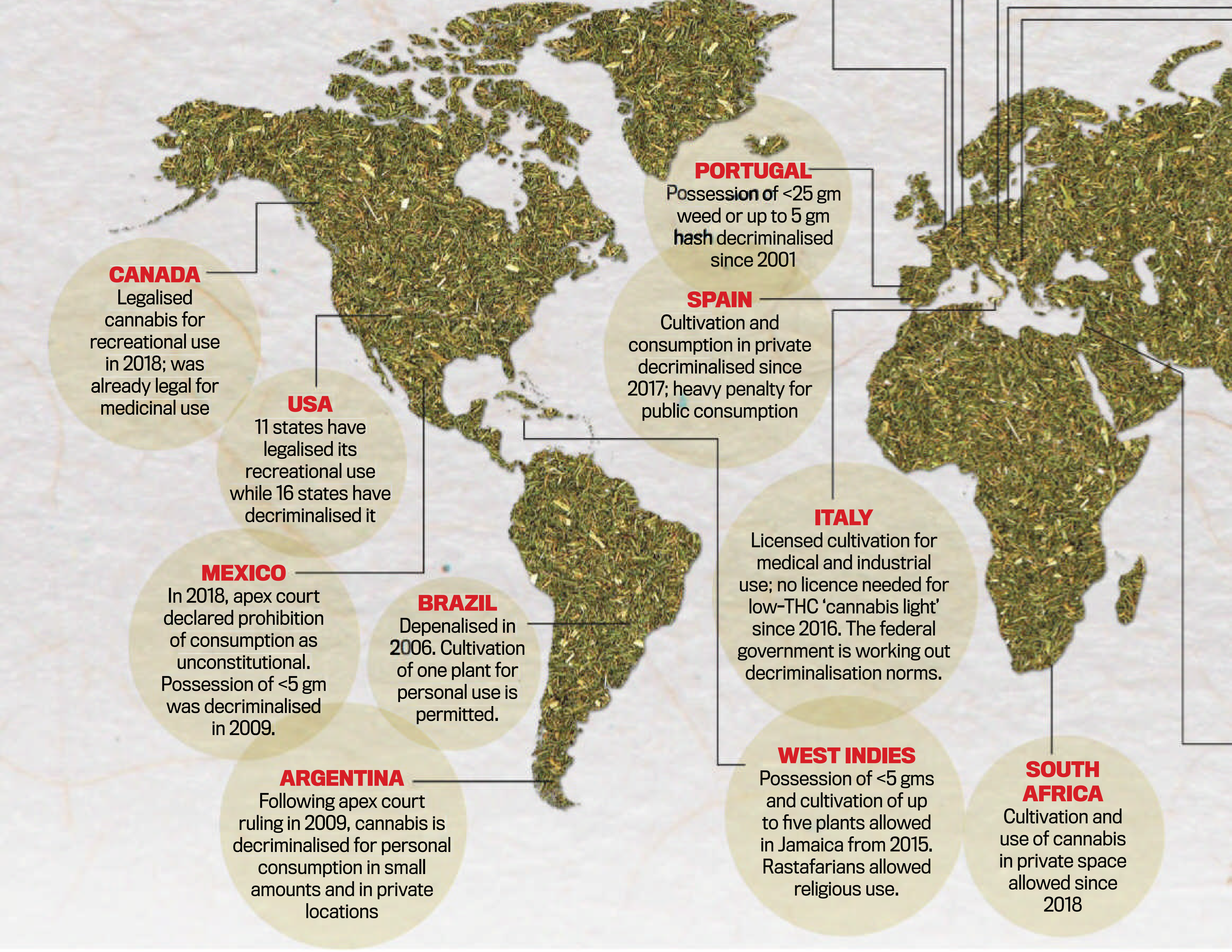
SUPER CREAM: The first rub of resin from a fully cultivated cannabis plant. The THC level and price depend on where the hash is obtained from. But it is usually more potent and more expensive.

GOLDEN WEED: Sourced from Bhutan, often via Assam, this is one of the cheapest varieties available–Rs 100 for 10 grams and a THC level of 16 to 23 per cent

MANIPURI WEED: With a THC level of around 20-23 per cent, this strain costs Rs 250 upwards for 10 grams

WORLD WIDE WEED

With countries across the world decriminalising the controlled use of cannabis, is it time India bit the bullet too?



BELGIUM
Possession of <3 gm for adults and cultivation of one plant decriminalised since 2003

THE NETHERLANDS
Recreational use allowed in licensed coffee shops since 1976. Possession of <5 grams and cultivating up to 5 plants for personal use decriminalised.

PORTUGAL
Possession of <25 gm weed or up to 5 gm hash decriminalised since 2001

SPAIN
Cultivation and consumption in private decriminalised since 2017; heavy penalty for public consumption

CANADA
Legalised cannabis for recreational use in 2018; was already legal for medicinal use

USA
11 states have legalised its recreational use while 16 states have decriminalised it

MEXICO
In 2018, apex court declared prohibition of consumption as unconstitutional. Possession of <5 gm was decriminalised in 2009.

BRAZIL
Depenalised in 2006. Cultivation of one plant for personal use is permitted.

ARGENTINA
Following apex court ruling in 2009, cannabis is decriminalised for personal consumption in small amounts and in private locations

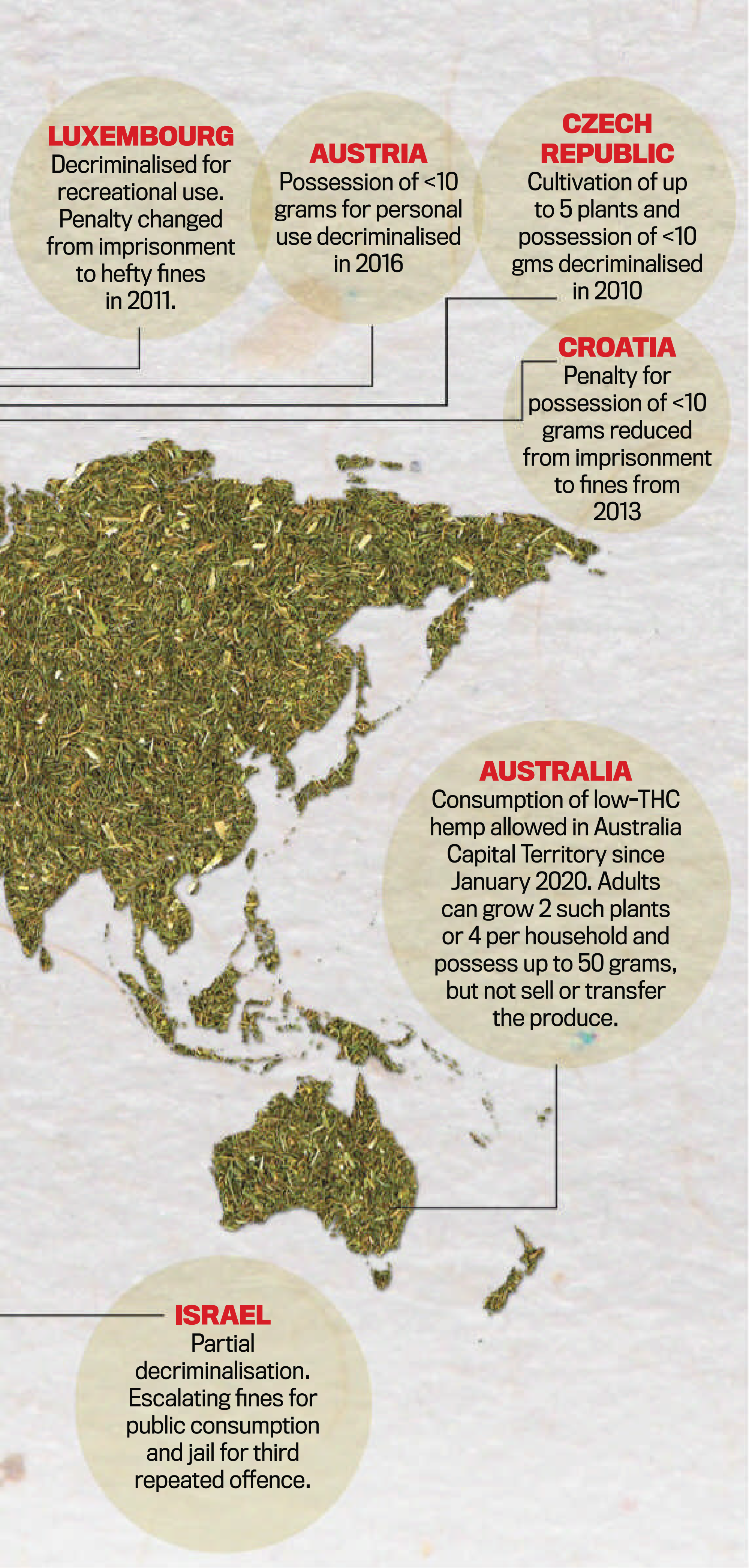
ITALY
Licensed cultivation for medical and industrial use; no licence needed for low-THC 'cannabis light' since 2016. The federal government is working out decriminalisation norms.

WEST INDIES
Possession of <5 gms and cultivation of up to five plants allowed in Jamaica from 2015. Rastafarians allowed religious use.

SOUTH AFRICA
Cultivation and use of cannabis in private space allowed since 2018

complaints of drug abuse, we can detect the network of peddlers and the big illegal commercial suppliers. We want to send the message that this is a wrong thing to do and we need to create awareness across agencies and governments to have it eradicated."

However, barring the recent spurt in the Rajput case, arrests for the possession of cannabis by the NCB and state police have been fitful, experts say. The NCB has been extra vigilant only in the first fortnight of September, seizing 5,477 kilos of cannabis from various medicine and vegetable trucks across the country and arresting 13 individuals for the same. National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) data for 2018 shows a 25 per cent rise in drug seizures, with weed topping the list at 391,275 kilos; hash fourth on the list after acid and opium at 3,911 kilos. However, while the quantity of drugs seized has risen, the number of cases against those found in possession of drugs for personal use has fallen—from 41,056 in 2017 to 38,715 in 2018. And these are numbers for all drugs; the arrests for cannabis possession and consumption may be even lower. A study



LUXEMBOURG
Decriminalised for recreational use. Penalty changed from imprisonment to hefty fines in 2011.

AUSTRIA
Possession of <10 grams for personal use decriminalised in 2016

CZECH REPUBLIC
Cultivation of up to 5 plants and possession of <10 gms decriminalised in 2010

CROATIA
Penalty for possession of <10 grams reduced from imprisonment to fines from 2013

AUSTRALIA
Consumption of low-THC hemp allowed in Australia Capital Territory since January 2020. Adults can grow 2 such plants or 4 per household and possess up to 50 grams, but not sell or transfer the produce.

ISRAEL
Partial decriminalisation. Escalating fines for public consumption and jail for third repeated offence.

> Earlier, it was the workers who would smoke weed at the end of a hard day's work. Increasingly, it is **youngsters, between 12 and 25 years,** who are using cannabis

by the Vidhi Centre for Legal Policy last year noted that most people arrested for cannabis possession are the poor and marginalised, while bigger sellers escape unscathed. "Usually, more seizures are made where cannabis is cultivated and not sold," says Romesh Bhattacharjee, a former Narcotics Commissioner of India. "It is the small and medium farmers who get harassed, not the larger sellers and buyers in big towns and cities."

Importantly, as Bhattacharjee points out, cannabis is cultivated in nearly 60 per cent, or 400, of India's 670 districts. It is considered a medicinal plant that has benefited humans and animals over the centuries. "Since we criminalised cannabis in India [in 1985]," he says, "we haven't curbed production or consumption. The law is redundant and has become a tool to harass small-time or poor buyers and sellers. Bhang is already legal in some states. There are millions of weed and hash users in major cities. You might as well legalise cannabis, and follow it with drug awareness outreach if you are worried about addiction. Sensitisation and dialogue are more effective in curbing addiction than half-hearted criminalisation." As to how to legalise cannabis, he has a simple answer: "Just remove it from the Narcotics Act. It is already 'legal' on the streets given its availability, only 'illegal' on paper."

A POTTED HISTORY

Cannabis has been popular in India since the beginning of recorded history. Kansas University geographer Barney Warf, in his 2014 research paper 'High Points: An Historical Geography of Cannabis', speculates that the plant was most likely brought to India by Aryan migrants between 1000 and 2000 BC. It is treated as a sacred plant in the Vedas, considered a source of joy. The Hindu god Shiva is revered as the Lord of Bhang. In British India, the Indian soldiers reputedly sipped bhang even as their foreign counterparts took swigs of whiskey before battle.

In fact, the British found the use of cannabis so extensive in India, that, concerned it would endanger the mental health of the natives, they commissioned a study on its cultivation and use in 1894. Over a thousand interviews were conducted among a wide range of people—from farmers to psychologists. The Indian Hemp Drugs Commission Report produced six volumes of data and concluded that there was no justification to suppress the use of cannabis; given its ancient and religious relevance, it was harmless when taken in moderation. In 1957, CSIR (Council for Scientific and Industrial Research) researchers I.C. Chopra and R.N. Chopra reviewed the report and reiterated that the findings held true over the years. It was only in 1985 that cannabis was criminalised under the NDPS Act, inviting imprisonment.

CAUGHT IN THE MUDDLE
Rhea Chakraborty being taken for a medical examination after being arrested

LEGAL HASH TAG

Why India needs to legalise the use of cannabis... Or not

The Pros...

- Will eliminate illegal trade and associated crimes
- Taxing cannabis will increase government's revenue
- Will reduce drug stigma and open up discussion on responsible use
- Cannabis has both medicinal and industrial benefits; hemp makes for great fibre
- Will help create jobs for local producers
- Will enable quality control laws to be enacted for cannabis, preventing its adulteration with more harmful chemicals
- Prohibition has failed to control the use and domestic production of cannabis

... and the Cons

- Could lead to increased usage; cannabis is not entirely free of risks and studies have shown repeated usage mimics the patterns of addiction to other drugs
- Cannabis psychosis is a growing medical problem and without laws to regulate overconsumption its prevalence could further increase
- The black market for cannabis, especially of low-grade products, is so well-established that a simple decriminalisation won't eradicate poor quality goods
- There have been recorded instances of cannabis dependency to cope with stress; cannabis use has also become a stepping stone to refined drugs sometimes

CANNABIS 2.0

Experts say an entire generation of Indians now regards cannabis as a harmless, ‘casual’ drug. “It is an affordable drug which is often viewed as ‘spiritual’,” says Girish Kurra, founder of the Umeed Wellness Clinic, a rehab centre in Delhi’s Vasant Kunj locality. He points out that the same people who smoke cannabis usually do not wish to try more refined drugs such as cocaine or heroin, which they believe are more addictive. In fact, many cannabis users are wary of even cigarettes and alcohol.

Today, there is a booming market for cannabis and related products, particularly among the youth. You only need to visit Delhi’s Paharganj area to encounter a whole cornucopia of cannabis products—Idukki Gold, Shillong Mango, Mysore Mango, Malana Kush, to name a few. Sellers compete with each other to proclaim they have the ‘purest’ product, the stuff ancient rishis once used. “It is absolutely safe to smoke weed, nothing addictive about it,” a shopkeeper assures me. While the weed is sold discreetly here, the smoking gadgetry is on open display, from a dazzling array of chillums, rolling paper, rolling machines. There is even a recipe book for cannabis which includes notes for ‘weed pizza sauce’, ‘weed wine’ and ‘weed coffee’. Row after row of shops hang merchandise outside their doors featuring the customary leaf design, images of Shiva rolling a joint and weed humour often in shades of bright neon on black.

It is the **social belief that weed is not the cause of mental health** issues that allows many users to relapse into addiction

Cannabis-spiked paan, brownies, chocolates and beer are the stuff of the past, a customer tells me. The young can now look forward to cannabis bath products, lip balm, toffee, cheese and dried noodles. “Cannabis is no longer the milk drink had at a festival or a substance smoked in a chillum—there is a bewilderingly wide range of creative products,” says Dr Rahul Luther, psychologist and founder of the Hope Trust, a deaddiction centre and rehab clinic in Hyderabad. The ABCD report shows Delhi to be among the top 10 cities in the world for cheap weed, second only to Latin American countries. Cheap ‘weed dust’ can be bought for as little as Rs 50, while 10 grams of average quality weed can cost anything between Rs 100 and Rs 250 in Delhi. Catchy products add to the appeal of weed amongst the youth, say experts. “Earlier, it would be the working class who would use these drugs,” says Dr I.R. Rajkumar, a psychiatrist and founder of the Alpha Healing Clinic in Vadodara, Gujarat. “Now it is the young that the drug-sellers target—90 to 95 per cent of all addiction begins between the ages of 12 and 25.” There is, however, no data to support his contention.

According to social justice and empowerment ministry data, there were 7.2 million ‘problem users’ of cannabis in 2018. Most counsellors stress the importance of sensitising young people to the dangers of drug addiction before it is too late. “Why do we wait till they are teenagers? Between the ages of 5 and 12, parents must be made aware of the importance of connecting and conversing with their children. If explained the harmful impact of drugs at a young age, the chances of addiction are much lower. It is because in India, society claims no responsibility for drug users, and parents don’t feel the need to guide a child through their adolescent years that young people are now using weed more and more,” says Dr Rajkumar. It starts with curiosity, he says, or to get a sense of identity or simply out of peer pressure. Often, it is also to escape circumstances or reality. “Some people can’t handle emotional realities and begin to use weed or other drugs to escape reality,” says Kurra. “They feel it numbs their reactions and makes them more peaceful. They turn drugs into a coping mechanism, which is harmful.”

CANNABIS PSYCHOSIS

A few months ago, Nakul Mehta, a 31-year-old marketing executive in Mumbai, walked out of a city drug rehab centre with some shocking news. Scans of his brain showed minor damage—reasons why doctors said he had become forgetful, more sensitive to stress and was having trouble with his eyesight. Mehta, who would smoke weed daily for three years, reached a stage where he began to display hallucinatory behaviour. His family admitted him for treatment after he tried to jump off the rood of their home in Bandra. Doctors who examined him said his symptoms were associated with cannabis psychosis and the result of repeated daily cannabis consumption. They concluded the products he was being sold were mixed with other, more harmful psychoactive compounds. These, together, with the cannabis addiction, wreaked permanent damage on his brain. Such cannabis-induced psychosis is getting increasingly well-documented in all major medical journals, and is now classified as a mental health illness by the medical community.

“There are some myths about weed and marijuana that need to be urgently addressed,” says Dr Luther. “Most people believe weed is spiritual, not harmful and certainly not addictive. Many also say that weed is medicinal—citing the fact that it is used in cancer treatment. These are all beliefs peddled by a multi-billion dollar drug industry. The addictive component in weed is mixed with other medicines to be used in any sort of treatment. Cannabis itself is harmful and can cause mental health issues.” Experts say cannabis consumption is in many ways similar to alcohol and tobacco use. But does addiction to smoking and drinking invite calls for their prohibition as the use of cannabis does?

The addictive factor of cannabis depends on the amount of tetrahdyrocannabinol or THC, the active compound that produces psychoactive sensations. Some products might be pure, but they are also expensive, almost Rs 3,000 for a gram, and therefore out of reach of most. Others that promise to be pure are mixed with other chemicals to make it addictive. “Cannabis is like a cigarette—we think only nicotine is addictive, but a person is smoking 4,000 chemicals with each cigarette. The same with cannabis—most of the time you are inhaling much more than just cannabis, even if it is from a ‘trusted dealer’,” says Dr Rajkumar. Samples of marijuana in India frequently reveal a higher level of THC, which gives the drug its high, and lowered levels of CBD or cannabidiol, which counters the effect of THC when the drug is consumed. A 2016 study in the National Centre for Biotechnology Information showed that out of 36,000 samples of illegal cannabis from around the world, THC levels had risen from around 4 per cent in the 1990s to nearly 12 per cent in 2014, shifting the ratio of THC to CBD from 1:14 in 1995 to about 1:80 in 2014.

A study by the Vidhi Centre for Legal Policy noted that most people arrested for cannabis possession are the **poor and marginalised**

According to a 2018 article—‘Cannabis Addiction and the Brain: A Review’—available in the data base PubMed, cannabis use disorder (regular use of cannabis or THC-spiked products) mimics the same patterns of addiction (anticipation of drug, intoxication with drug, withdrawal from drug) as hard drugs. However, a 2007 study in the *Indian Journal of Psychiatry* observed that those who smoked cannabis and displayed symptoms of psychosis but had no other mental health issues showed signs of recovery within a week of abstinence. It is the social belief that cannabis is not the cause of mental health issues that allows many users to relapse into addiction, making cannabis addiction harder to treat than the dependence on refined drugs that have a greater perceived risk among users. “Cannabis might not be as strong as coke or heroin, but because people are often in denial over its harmful effects, many users return to smoking cannabis even after rehab,” says Dr Luther.

A CASE FOR DECRIMINALISATION

There has been much debate over legalising marijuana. Globally, in the past decade, several countries have legalised the consumption of cannabis for medicinal purposes, while Uruguay and Canada have legalised it entirely. At present, 11 states in the US have legalised cannabis for recreational use, and another 16 for medicinal research. The reasons cited included marijuana being a less harmful drug, its widespread use and the fact that decriminalising it would encourage more conversation around responsible drug consumption. In 2018, Canada became only the second country after Uruguay to formally legalise the cultivation, possession, acquisition and consumption of cannabis and its byproducts. Several European countries, including Austria, Belgium and the Czech Republic, also allow controlled possession and cultivation of marijuana (see *World Wide Weed*).

These arguments, however, have not convinced the Indian government so far. Says an NCB source: “Yes, many countries are doing so. The US is the biggest votary of medicinal and other uses [of cannabis]. It is pushing for it to be legalised internationally. But there is a lot of resistance from other countries. In India, we do not support legalising it, as a matter of government policy. The main reason [is that] it is likely to be more abused than used.”

The NCB is also pushing for amendments to the NDPS Act so that it is more stringent on peddlers rather than consumers. One of the important modifications the NCB is pushing for is the re-classification of offences under the Act for personal consumption, small drug peddlers and the big commercial dealers. Many of the big dealers take advantage of current provisions that are less harsh to small peddlers and escape lightly. “For the consumers,” says an NCB source, “especially for first-time offenders, the punishment should be moderate and they should face less harassment. So, we have suggested changes that are both deterrent in nature and constructive.”

Other experts propound an economic argument for legalisation. Given India’s production capacity of cannabis, the government stands to benefit in terms of tax—India alone accounted for 6 per cent of the world’s cannabis herb seizures in 2016 (nearly 300 tonnes), and even higher quantities in 2017 (353 tonnes)—a 20 per cent increase compared to 2016, as per a report by the UN Office on Drugs and Crime. The ABCD report estimated how India could gain in taxation terms if it were to legalise a product that continues to exist despite attempts to crack down on it. New Delhi could raise up to Rs 725 crore a year, while Mumbai could raise Rs 641 crore if weed were taxed at the same rate as the most popular cigarette in the city. If the average US tax rate on marijuana is applied, Delhi could raise Rs 225 crore and Mumbai Rs 199 crore.

Yet others believe the NCB time would be better spent chasing more harmful drugs than cannabis. The real worry is that drugs like heroin and cocaine, or synthetic drugs like Ecstasy are more dangerous and circulate in large quantities. Heroin is smuggled in from countries like

OTHER KICKS ON THE BLOCK

Any legislation on drugs would be better off handling the wide variety of addictive drugs in use rather than just cannabis

Methamphetamines: White powder that users swallow, smoke, snort or inject. It's made using pseudoephedrine, a common ingredient in cold medi-cations

Cocaine: A highly addictive stimulant made from the coca plant. Users snort or inject it into their bloodstream.

Ecstasy: A man-made hallucinogen usually consumed as a pill

LSD: A hallucinogen made from an acid found in a fungus that grows on rye and other grains. It can also be produced synthetically.

Heroin: A fast-acting opioid derived from the opium poppy flower. It is snorted or consumed in the form of powder.

Flakka: A pale-hued crystal that users can eat, snort, inject or vaporise via an e-cigarette device. Has synthetic cathinone that induces a stimulant-like effect.

Ayahuasca: A Brazilian hallucinogen, the drug is imbibed as a brew made from the ayahuasca vine (Banisteriopsis caapi) and the chacruna shrub (Psycotria viridis), which contains the human neurotransmitter N,N-dimethyltryptamine.

Mushrooms: 'Magic mushrooms' or 'shrooms' are a variety of fungus that contain the hallucinogen psillocybin. The dried mushrooms are eaten or brewed in a 'tea'.

Krokodil: A combination of several harmful chemicals, including codeine, iodine, gasoline, paint thinner, lighter fluid and others. Users inject it into the bloodstream to experience a rapid and brief effect. Damages blood vessels, leaving a crocodile-like effect on the skin.

Spice: A mixture of different herbs and chemicals that resembles potpourri. Users either smoke it like marijuana or make a herbal tea-like drink. The compounds in the drug mimic those in THC, the psychoactive compound found in cannabis.

Nyaope: A mixture of low-grade heroin, cannabis products, antiretroviral drugs which is commonly smoked

Monkey Dust: A highly addictive synthetic cathinone that comes as an off-white powder and can be swallowed, injected or snorted

Afghanistan, Pakistan and Myanmar. The 2019 survey by the social justice and empowerment ministry estimated 6.3 million 'problem users' of heroin in India in the previous year. The NCB estimates daily consumption of heroin to be 1 tonne, so the total business would be worth over Rs 14.6 lakh crore per year, or 7.2 per cent of India's GDP. By contrast, the 7.2 million 'problem users' of cannabis may be consuming Rs 1.29 lakh crore worth of the substance. A mind-boggling amount of synthetic drugs are also being illegally consumed, given that India is one of the world's largest pharma manufacturers. The NCB needs greater resources and time to focus on cracking down on the peddlers of these drugs rather than cannabis.

Legalising marijuana can also help reduce addictive behaviour by erasing the stigma around it. For instance, cannabis use fell drastically in Portugal after the country decriminalised weed and hash use in 2001. Among the strongest arguments advanced by those in favour of legalising cannabis is that the law has not served its purpose and a legalised product could also be better regulated for quality, price and commercial purposes. "There are a lot of adulterated cannabis products in the market. These are far more harmful than the pure plant. But there is no way to control quality for an illegal drug," says Dr Rajkumar.

Consumption of cannabis has increased significantly despite the law in 1985, as per research by the Institute of Narcotics Studies Analysis (INSA), a New Delhi-based think-tank. The institute's Jogendra Singh advocates stringent enforcement and not just regularisation of cannabis to curb the rise in its consumption. Others agree. "Cannabis consumption and production cannot be controlled in India. There is no point in turning a blind eye to the millions who consume it across the country. Given the consumption, the arrests under NDPS Act for cannabis are very little and largely done to heckle the common man. Doing away with a law which has not succeeded will provide relief to many," says ex-Narcotics commissioner Bhattacharjee.

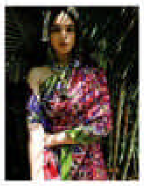
However, there is no scientific study yet to conclusively prove that legalising cannabis leads to a healthier relationship with drugs and substance abuse. "The crime rate might fall, but the addictive nature of drugs won't change. We don't need to make marijuana legal to protect young people from drug addiction—we need more dialogue over its influence and negative effects," says Dr Luther. According to him, any attempt to legalise must be followed up with an open dialogue on drugs with young people, to make them aware of responsible and safe drug consumption. It's a tough call—but India must settle the debate on whether or not to legalise the use of cannabis. Sooner rather than later. ■

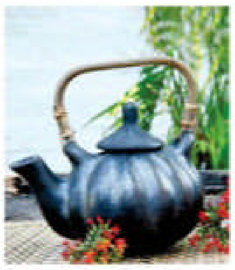
—with Anilesh S. Mahajan

सत्यमेव जयते
MINISTRY OF TRIBAL AFFAIRS

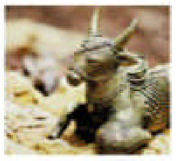
ट्राईफेड
TRIFED

tRIBES INDIA
ट्राइब्स इंडिया





VAN DHAN
VIKAS KENDRA
VALUE ADDITION PROGRAMME



DIGITAL TRIFED: EFFECTING A DIGITAL REVOLUTION IN TRIBAL ECONOMY

Opportunities are usually found in hard times. Especially in these unprecedented times that we are living in. The ongoing pandemic has not spared any section of the society and has affected every segment and facet of life. The tribal community, in particular, is battling unemployment, losses of jobs and livelihoods.

Using these challenging times as an opportunity and keeping all aspects of tribal lives and commerce at the forefront, TRIFED has proactively embarked on an all-encompassing digitisation drive – one that has the potential of transforming tribal life.

With online modes gaining higher acceptance for all needs – be it operations, communication or business, TRIFED has taken a giant leap towards digitisation.

Adopting a multi-pronged approach, the digital transformation strategy takes into account both the supply and the demand side of tribal commerce. It will map and link its village-based tribal producers and artisans to national and international markets by setting up state of art e-platforms benchmarked to international standards.

The digital initiatives undertaken by TRIFED include both the front-end and back-end. Its main website as well as its ecommerce portal have both been revamped.

The redesigned website www.trifed.tribal.gov.in is one-stop shop for all relevant information related to TRIFED, the organisation, its regional offices, Van Dhan Vikas Kendras, its retail outlets and its various programmes and initiatives. The site is a platform to connect and collaborate in the mission to empower the tribal communities across the country.

www.tribesindia.com, the revamped e-Commerce website offers a large range of tribal products online. These products range from creative masterpieces and artefacts such as dokra metal pieces, beautiful pottery, paintings to colourful, comfortable apparel, distinctive jewellery and essential food items such as spices, rice, tea, coffee and honey.

"We are firmly standing behind 50 lakh tribal artisans and forest gatherers in their hour of need, steadily and firmly to sustain their income, employment and livelihoods."

— Shri Arjun Munda, Union Minister of Tribal Affairs

TribesIndia also has a mobile app available on Google Playstore. In order to get a wider reach for tribal products and to benefit the suffering artisans and forest dwellers, TRIFED has also partnered with other

TRIFED GOES DIGITAL

- **TRIFED website – http://trifed.tribal.gov.in revamped with all information available – real-time**
- **Revamped Tribes India website – www.tribesindia.com**
- **An exclusive e-marketplace for tribal producers – artisans and forest dwellers – https://market.tribesindia.com**
- **Tribes India now on Government eMarketplace**
- **Digitisation of all information related to tribal forest dwellers engaged in MFP procurement and value addition**
- **Van Dhan MIS portal and mobile app**

GREEN CHILLY PICKLE
Van Dhan Naturals
vana
वन धन विकास केंद्र

"The 'Van Dhan Karyakram' under the Ministry of Tribal Affairs will establish 50,000 'Van Dhan Vikas Kendras' (VDVK) in the tribal areas across the country to ensure livelihood generation and empowerment of the tribal people. Van Dhan scheme has the cluster of Self-Help Groups to support tribals and is the mainstay for their family income who are living in and around the forest areas."

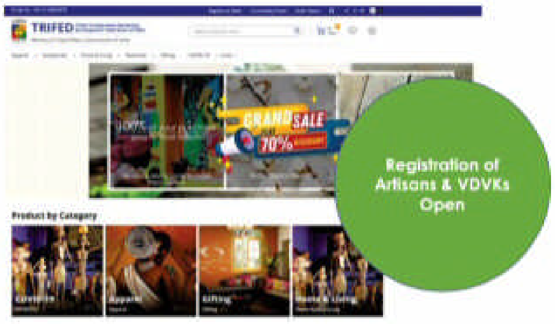
— Smt. Renuka Singh, Minister of State

e-commerce portals such as Amazon, Flipkart, Snapdeal and PayTM.

Tribes India products are also now available on Government eMarketplace (https://mkp.gem.gov.in/arts-and-crafts-equipment-and-accessories-and-supplies-art-paintings/search) to facilitate purchases by Government. Government Departments, Ministries and PSUs can access TRIBES India products via Government e-Marketplace (GeM) and shop as per GFR regulations.

A game-changing initiative of TRIFED is its exclusive e-marketplace for tribal producers – forest dwellers and artisans which will facilitate the purchase of MFPs, handicrafts and handlooms online.

The Tribes India E-Market (http://market.tribesindia.com), to be launched shortly, is an omni-channel facility for the tribals where they can sell their goods to a large national and international audience through their own e-shop. TRIFED is in the process of onboarding approximately 5 lakh tribal producers across the country and sourcing their natural produce, handcrafted goods. These also comprise of individual tribal artisans, tribal SHGs, Organisations/ Agencies/ NGOs working with tribals.



Enabled with digital payments, the Tribes India E-Market offers an excellent opportunity for the tribal brethren to also improve their credit history. Inpartnership with NSIC (M/o MSME), TRIFED has initiated the registration of all Artisans on Udyog Aadhaar Memorandum (UAM).

Tribal artisans, SHGs, NGOs, forest dwellers, interested in selling their products on this marketplace can register themselves on: http://market.tribesindia.com/seller-register

TRIFED is in the process of digitising all the information related to the forest dwellers associated with the Van Dhan Yojana, village haats and their warehouses. This digitisation effort wherein all tribal clusters are identified and mapped using GIS technology will help bring benefits to these people under the Atmanirbhar Abhiyan clarion call given by PM Modi.

In these times of these distressed periods, digital transformation only seems to be a viable path to ensure livelihoods are not disrupted.

Van Dhan Yojana

365,800	1,205	174	167
Gatherers	VDVKs	Districts	Crores Funded

VAN DHAN PHASE 2 TARGETS

- **50,000 Van Dhan SHGs as Primary Production Centers**
- **Modernization of 10, 000 Haat Bazaars.**
- **Setting up 1000 Secondary and Tertiary (TRIFOOD) Processing cum Value Addition Centers**
- **Setting up 1000 Van Dhan Producer Companies to coordinate for Marketing of procured products**
- **Employment opportunities for 50 Lac Tribal Gatherers**

VAN DHAN 2020-21 AND BEYOND

While digital transformation is definitely an enabler, to ensure that the ground is not lost in TRIFED's mission, some more initiatives are being planned. A paradigm shift has been envisaged in the improvement of socio-economic condition of 1.5 Crore tribal gatherers. Convergences with various Ministries and Departments such as Ministry of Rural Development (MoRD), Ministry of Small and Medium Enterprises (MSME), Ministry of Food Processing Industries (MoFPI), Ministry of AYUSH are being planned all with the aim of improving sustainable livelihoods and income opportunities for these tribals.

One major step is the convergence of the Van Dhan Yojana with the MSP for MFP Scheme is one Together, these two initiatives offer a comprehensive development package for tribals promoting employment and incomes and entrepreneurship. An additional 1800 VDVKs with the continued participation of State Nodal Departments, State Implementation agencies and Mentoring agencies, is being planned in the coming year to facilitate creation of sustainable livelihoods and generate income for the forest-based tribes. TRIFED has also tied up with SFURTI to set up 50,000 Van Dhan SHGs as primary production centres which will be managed mainly by the tribals. 1000 Van Dhan Producer Companies will also be set up to coordinate Marketing.

10, 000 Haat Bazaars will be modernised with necessary linkages to Godown Facilities. Through the **TRIFOOD'** project, in association with MoFPI & NSTFDC, TRIFED aims to enhance tribal income by better utilisation and value addition to minor forest produce (MFP) collected by tribal gatherers from forested areas. Setting up of 1000 Secondary and Tertiary (TRIFOOD) Processing Centers is targeted. Enhancement of income of the tribals in triple fold or in some cases quadrupling from INR6000/- to INR24000/- through their involvement in various activities

"A large number of people have adopted online shopping in India under lockdown and it is only to further increase once the lockdown regulations are relaxed. On the supply side, the lockdown due to Covid-19 has dealt a serious blow to the livelihoods of the poor and marginalised communities including the tribal artisans and forest dwelling minor forest produce gatherers. TRIFED has to strategically respond to the emerging situation. It is in this context that the digitisation strategy has been formulated. "

— Pravir Krishna, Managing Director, TRIFED

TRIFED has signed up agreements or is in the final stages of agreements for introducing additional Income generating Activities under Agri/Floriculture/ Horticulture/ Medicinal & aromatic plants / other interventions, supported by strong Branding & Marketing. TRIFED's Convergence initiative will include M/o MSME (SFURTI, ESDP), AYUSH/NMPB, ICAR , MoFPI FSSAI, FME), District Mineral Funds, Article 25(1) grants, CSR and others etc.

……

"Van dhan Yojana aims to become a people driven movement- mainstreaming Forest Rights Act and realising benefits to tribals."

BUY TRIFED/TRIBESINDIA PRODUCTS AT:

SCAN ME

Snapdeal	https://www.snapdeal.com/brand/tribes-india?sort=plrty
Flipkart	https://www.flipkart.com/home-decor/tribes-india~brand/pr?sid=arb
Amazon	https://www.amazon.in/b?ie=UTF8&node=15436998031
GeM	https://mkp.gem.gov.in/search?q=tribesindia
TribesIndia	https://www.tribesindia.com/

GROUND REPORT
LADAKH

LADAKH'S COLD WAR

AS THE INDIA-CHINA STANDOFF NEAR WINTER, THE ARMED FORCES RAMP UP ABILITIES TO SUSTAIN THEMSELVES THROUGH IT. WHO WILL WIN THE GAME OF LOGISTICS?

By Sandeep Unnithan in Leh

Photographs by **BANDEEP SINGH**

A grey IAF CH-47 Chinook begins taxiing down the runway at Leh's Khushu Rimpoche airport, its distinctive twin rotors furiously chopping through the thin mountain air to generate lift.

Inside the belly of this US-built chopper are neatly packed cardboard cartons of high-altitude clothing, winter boots, canned tuna in oil and special chocolate milk that ground crew has offloaded from another American workhorse, a Boeing C-17 heavy lifter that flew in from Chandigarh. The recipients—thousands of Indian soldiers parcelled out on posts along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) with China in eastern Ladakh to face off with the PLA. This is the closest the two armies have been to a military confrontation in over three decades. With the standoff entering its fifth month with no détente in sight, the focus has now shifted towards logistics, ensuring that over 40,000 freshly transferred soldiers are fed, clothed and sheltered through the approaching winter. Leh, the capital of the newly established Ladakh Union territory, is the fulcrum of a colossal military effort.

HIGH RIDE
An IAF Chinook helicopter takes off with supplies from the Leh airport

INDIAN AIR FORCE

The Kushok Bakula Rimpoche Airport is one span of an air bridge stretching 700 km south into the Indian hinterland. Flights of Soviet-built IL-76s and US-built C-17s fly nonstop daily sorties from Chandigarh to here ferrying essential supplies. From here, the cargo is offloaded into helicopters and flown or trucked to the army's forward posts. This logistical exercise unfolds under a military sky ballet that begins unfailingly at the break of dawn—MiG-29s, Sukhoi Su-30s and Mirage-2000s from bases across north India pinwheel around the azure blue skies in combat air patrols and Apache helicopter gunships clatter around the airport like angry dragonflies.

Taped on the cockpit door of an Army Aviation Corps Dhruv Advanced Light Helicopter is a small sign that is a grim reminder that military logistics isn't cheap: 'Flying cost—Rs 7,17,000 per hour.'

'Enhanced winter stocking' or EWS as the army calls it, stockpiles food and fuel to last the military garrison through the winter when snowfall blocks the only two road routes into the region—the Srinagar-Leh national highway and the Manali-Leh road which is open between May and September. But this year clearly, it is EWS-plus—the army has to cater for the food, clothing, shelter and equipment for another corps-sized formation it inducted into the theatre beginning June this year. The Chinese have an equal number across on the Tibetan plateau. In sheer numbers alone, these deployments by the two Asian giants are possibly the largest high-altitude massing of troops in the history of military standoffs.

Two rounds of high-level talks, between foreign minister S. Jaishankar and his counterpart Wang Yi in Moscow on September 4, and between defence minister Rajnath Singh and Chinese defence minister General Wei Fenghe, have failed to resolve matters to any satisfaction. In a dozen rounds of talks at the military, diplomatic and NSA level, India had asked for the Chinese to restore the LAC to what it was before April 2020; that is, sending the PLA back to its barracks in Xinjiang Military District and restoring 'status quo ante'. The Latin phrase has since been missing in the statements issued after these two rounds of talks. In a strongly worded statement in Parliament on September 15, defence minister Rajnath Singh squarely blamed China for violating multiple agreements by amassing troops on the border. "In the recent incidents, the violent conduct of Chinese forces has been in complete violation of all mutually agreed norms," he said.

On ground zero in eastern Ladakh, both sides have settled down to a tense game of high-altitude 'chicken'—the side which pulls back first, loses. The Chinese have refused to withdraw eight km behind Finger 4 on the Pangong lake and two km behind the Gogra Post in northern Ladakh. The Indian army is atop the hills of an erstwhile No Man's Land in the Chushul sub-sector south of Pangong lake and on heights facing the Chinese positions north of the lake. Logistic tails—ferrying men, supplies and materiel to sustain the frontline—have begun snaking behind the two deployments as a brutal Himalayan winter approaches.

THE LOGISTICS TAIL

By the end of September, winter will set in over India's largest high altitude cold desert, Ladakh. The skies become overcast, icy skin-lacerating winds whip around the barren landscape, temperatures dip to as low as 40 degrees below zero and the snow piles up to 40 feet. Fresh eggs, juices and vegetable oil flown in by the air bridge from Chandigarh turn to stone by the time they reach the forward posts.

No one knows this better than the personnel of the Leh-based 14 Corps, set up after the 1999 Kargil War between Pakistan and India. The world's only army corps (a formation with two divisions) permanently deployed at high altitudes, it faces Pakistan in the east and China to the west. Winter hits both sides differently. Kargil and Drass become snowbound. Eastern Ladakh, where the standoff is under way, has sparse snow but is as cold and windier.

THE WINTER SOLDIERS

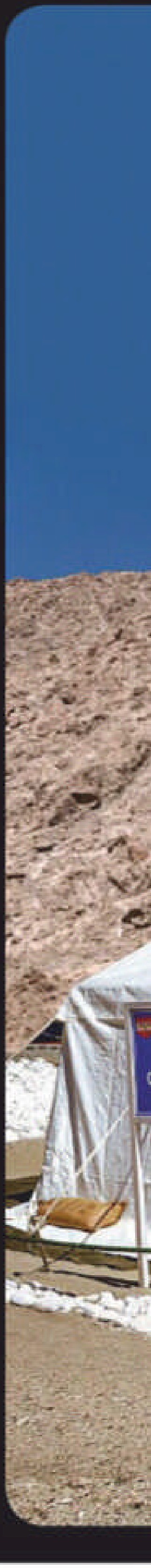
CLOTHING AND PROVISIONING ADDITIONAL SOLDIERS THROUGH LADAKH'S BRUTAL HIGH-ALTITUDE WINTER WILL STRETCH THE ARMY'S RESOURCES

PROBLEMS

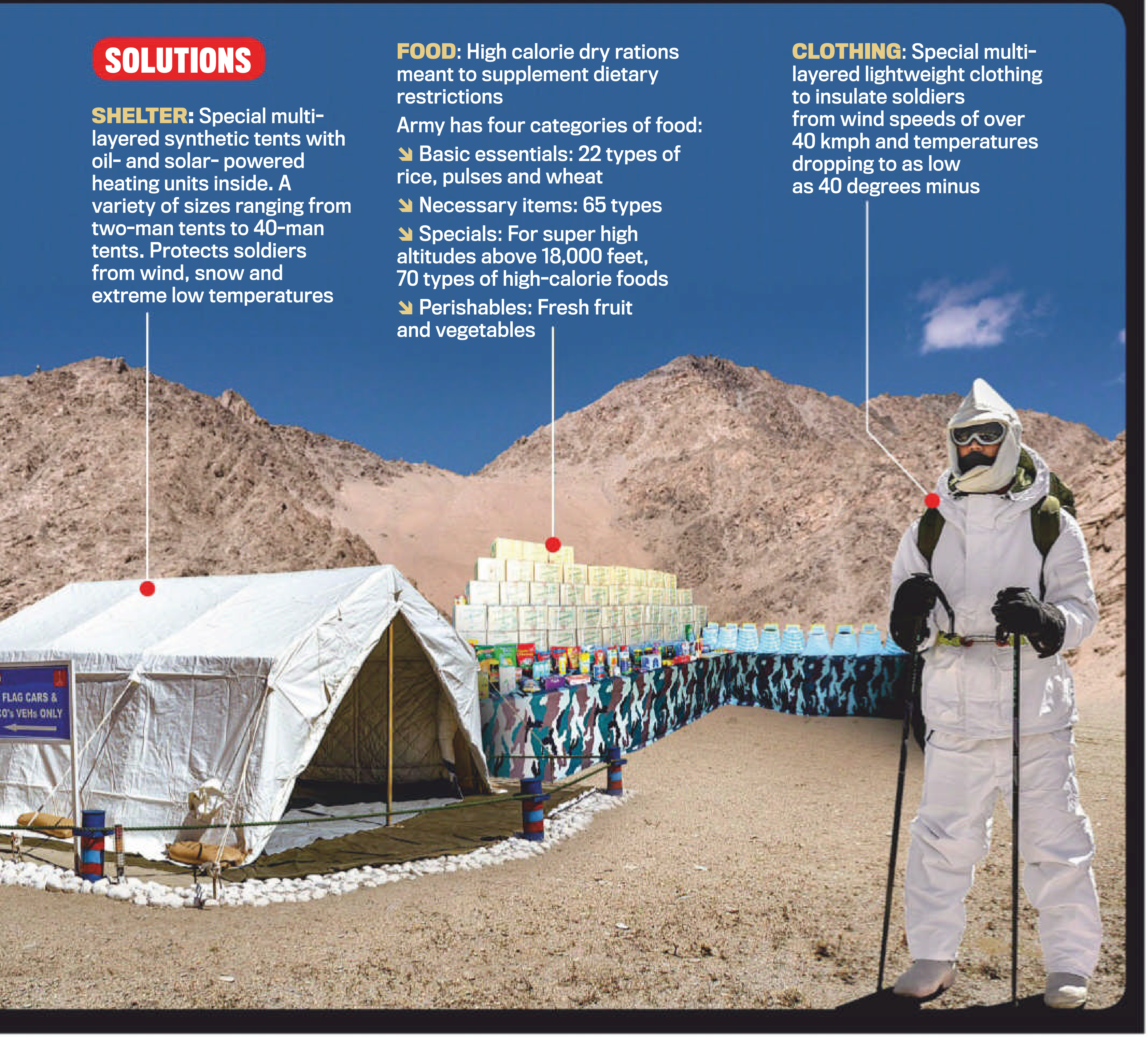
TEMPERATURE: Dips to as low as 40 degrees below zero. Rivers including the Indus and Shyok freeze as does the Pangong lake. Water freezes in pipes

WIND SPEEDS: Over 60 kmph gales further reduce temperatures

NUTRITION: Soldiers consume an average of 3,000 kilo calories per day on the plains. This increases to over 4,000 kilo calories per day. High altitudes of over 14,000 feet also lead to reduced appetites. Takes roughly 1.7 kgs of provisions per soldier per day and a total of 800 kgs to last through the winter



THIS COULD BE THE LARGEST HIGH-ALTITUDE TROOPS MASSING IN THE HISTORY OF MILITARY STANDOFFS



SOLUTIONS

SHELTER: Special multi-layered synthetic tents with oil- and solar- powered heating units inside. A variety of sizes ranging from two-man tents to 40-man tents. Protects soldiers from wind, snow and extreme low temperatures

FOOD: High calorie dry rations meant to supplement dietary restrictions

Army has four categories of food:

- Basic essentials: 22 types of rice, pulses and wheat
- Necessary items: 65 types
- Specials: For super high altitudes above 18,000 feet, 70 types of high-calorie foods
- Perishables: Fresh fruit and vegetables

CLOTHING: Special multi-layered lightweight clothing to insulate soldiers from wind speeds of over 40 kmph and temperatures dropping to as low as 40 degrees minus

The answer to fighting the cold lies in a military catch-all, FOL or Fuel, Oil and Lubricants. FOL, by some estimates, accounts for over 60 per cent of the logistical requirements of troops in the theatre. Oil-fired bukharis heat Arctic tents. Food is cooked on oil stoves and used to melt snow for drinking water. Petrol and diesel runs vehicles and jet fuel powers the IAF helicopters and aircraft which fly in the supplies.

In a picturesque valley overlooking Leh, a signboard welcomes you to 'The Scattered Tanks'—the world's highest FOL depot. The air is thick with the smell of fuel. There are thousands of green drums and jerrycans for as far as the eye can see. An army officer stands on a giant concrete tank with metal hatches that holds 400,000 litres of diesel, enough to fill half an Olympic-sized swimming pool, and explains how the lifeblood travels around the sector. A row of civilian tankers empty their tanks into this underground reservoir. From here it is decanted into barrels and fuel tankers, a process known as 'bulk breaking', and trucked to the posts along the LAC. Giant convoys of military trucks, each carrying 12,000 litres of fuel, radiate out of Leh.

"We've learned a lot over the past three decades...the glacier (Siachen) taught us so much," says Lt Gen. Rakesh Sharma, former GoC of the 14 Corps. The key to ensuring that troops can sustain themselves through the winter is logistics. "Amateurs talk about tactics, but professionals study logistics," as US Marine Corp's Gen. Robert H. Barrow noted four decades ago. These could well be the motto of the professionals in the army's Directorate General of Opera-

SUPPLY CHANNELS
(Above) A convoy of trucks with fuel and supplies lined up at Leh; underground fuel tanks at the army FOL depot in Leh

tional Logistics and Strategic Movement (DGOL&SM) in South Block which is coordinating this massive movement of men and materiel. The army has had three decades of experience in setting up the infrastructure to battle the cold in Siachen, where conditions are far more demanding that the frontier with China. It will need time and resources to create the same all along the LAC.

It costs the Indian Army Rs 5 crore a day to maintain a brigade of troops—over 3,000 soldiers—on the Siachen glacier. There are no estimates as to what the new LAC deployments will cost, but it will be substantial. This does not count the significant cost of the air bridge—the transport aircraft and helicopters that ferry supplies to its far-flung winter posts and the wear and tear on equipment and machinery. The Border Roads Organisation, the MoD's military infrastructure-building agency, has been tasked with ensuring the Srinagar-Leh route stays open for as long as possible this year. This involves widening the existing road and procuring additional snow clearing equipment to clear the Zojila Pass leading into Leh.

The 14 Corps will no doubt be studying the logistical war games and its contingency plans for both the China and Pakistan front to deal with the surge in troops. Not only does it have to sustain an additional army corps that was rapidly inducted in June but also has to provision troops that are part of a dramatic forward move. On August 29, over a brigade of Indian special forces climbed up and occupied a 40-km-long series of hills south of the Pangong lake overlooking Chinese positions. The Indian Army calls it an 'area denial operation' and says it pre-empted the Chinese move to occupy them. These heights, on the Indian side of the LAC, were last occupied during the 1962 war with China.

"I talked to officers, JCOs (Junior Commissioned Officers) and took stock of preparedness. I took a first-hand look of the situation on the ground. The morale of the jawans is high and they are ready to deal with all challenges," army chief Gen. M.M. Naravane told news agency ANI after touring units across Ladakh on September 4, just days after the Indian special forces were ensconced on the hill features. The move forward has brought troops on both sides within hundreds of metres of each other and, potentially, closer to confrontation than ever before. The army's amended rules of engagement (RoE) after the June 15 clash in which 20 Indian soldiers and an unnamed number of Chinese soldiers died, now, reportedly, authorises troops to open fire in case of any provocation.

The task will be to ensure these soldiers sitting on exposed hilltops are protected from the elements at all times. A military surgeon points to three challenges in ensuring medical care for frontline soldiers—the sheer number of troops brought in by the rapid deployment, the vagaries of the high altitudes and the absence of fixed infrastructure in the forward areas.

THERE ARE UNNERVING PARALLELS BETWEEN EVENTS IN THE RUN-UP TO THE 1962 WAR AND WHAT IS PLAYING OUT NOW

There are unnerving parallels between events in the run-up to the 1962 border conflict fought between October and November that year and what is currently playing out on the LAC. The casus belli for the 1962 war was the Indian government's 'Forward Policy' which saw penny packets of soldiers asked to occupy posts along the LAC, some of them still in summer uniforms and no boots.

The Indian Army of 1962, as a *Time* magazine article wrote, lacked everything but courage. It lacked engineering equipment for high-altitude operations, insufficient tents to house its troops or rations to feed the troops. There were few mountain roads and hence motorised transport could not reach the borders. Supplies had to be brought in by pack animals. The thinly-held positions were then overrun by a well-equipped PLA. The army says it has since exorcised the ghosts of that war. "Operational logistics plays an important role for the Fire and Fury Corps," says Major Gen. Arvind Kapoor, Chief of Staff of the 14 Corps, as he addresses the media in front of the war memorial in Leh, cavalry whip in hand. "We've mastered it over the past 20 years. Our logistics infrastructure is so smartly built that any unit coming in from outside can plug and play with any of the units here and immediately becomes (combat) effective."

Over the past four months, army officials say the Northern Command has stocked up special fuel and lubricants for tanks and armored personnel carriers and spares for maintenance. It has established water points and tube wells for troops. Warm living barracks have been prepared with facilities like central heating systems. Various types of ammunition, including small arms, missiles and for tank and artillery have been stocked and the medical system has also been prepared for any eventuality.

The PLA, meanwhile, has created its own infrastructure along the Western Highway where it is deployed. Infrastructure, including pre-fabricated shelters, are being set up at a relentless pace to prepare for a sustained deployment through the winter. Analysts believe both the divisions of the Xinjiang Military District will continue to remain forward deployed along the LAC. This, even as the PLA steps up its propaganda offensive to get India to back down from the heights.

Over the fortnight since the Indian Army countermove in the Chushul subsector, the Chinese communist party mouthpiece *Global Times* has run a series of propaganda videos purportedly to showcase China's superior infrastructure on the Tibetan plateau. It depicted drone swarms delivering hot food to frontline troops and soldiers trudging through the snow. "With these drones, the PLA's frontline soldiers can enjoy hot meals once winter reaches the plateau. Some sympathise with the nearby Indian soldiers who can only eat cold canned food and have to endure the severe cold and potential spread of Covid-19," *Global Times* editor Hu Xijin tweeted.

Military analysts point to ties between the two sides going into a deep freeze unless the border issue is demarcated. "Militarily, we must remain alert and prepare ourselves to spend the winter of 2020/21 on the LAC," says Lt Gen. Vinay Shankar, former director-general artillery, and a veteran of the 1962 war with China. "This ought to give sufficient time to the diplomats and the political leadership to arrive at a settlement or figure out the contours of our future relationship." ■

^ **BIG STRIDES?** CM Uddhav Thackeray with son and minister Aaditya Thackeray at the Vidhan Bhavan on the first day of the monsoon session, September 7, 2020

IN THE EYE OF A STORM

CM Uddhav Thackeray is under fire as Maharashtra struggles to contain the pandemic and revive industrial growth in the state. The poor handling of the Sushant Singh Rajput case has done him no favours

BY KIRAN D. TARE

When he took over as the 19th chief minister of Maharashtra, Uddhav Thackeray, the wildlife photography enthusiast-turned-politician looked like he would bring something fresh to the table. The Shiv Sena chief had formed a coalition government, the Maharashtra Vikas Aghadi (MVA), with two unlikely allies—the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) and the Congress; he also promised to make the farmers *chintamukta* (tension-free) and, to demonstrate that intent, announced a farm loan waiver of up to Rs 2 lakh. He was witty and accommodating, and confident of negotiating the political churn that had brought together the Sena and the Congress, two parties with no ideological affinity. The opposition BJP predicted the three-party "autorickshaw government" (ex-chief minister Devendra Fadnavis's words) would soon collapse under the weight of its contradictions, but Thackeray proved them wrong too.

However, 10 months into the job, Thackeray is in the eye of a storm. The pandemic is raging and Maharashtra, embarrassingly, is No. 1 among the affected states with over one million cases on September 14. The state has struggled to get new industrial investments and with the Centre reneging on its GST (Goods and Sales Tax) commitments to states—and offering instead a loan window that most non-BJP states are protesting—it is battling a revenue shortfall of 60 per cent so far in the current fiscal. Also, a perception is gaining ground that the 60-year-old chief minister is yielding to the bureaucracy at a time when the state needs firm political leadership. Thackeray and the Sena have also taken flak over the Mumbai Police's handling of the Sushant Singh Rajput case, and the way the party joined issue with actor Kangana Ranaut.

Thackeray's popularity was at a high in the beginning, with people thronging his chambers in the Mantralaya just to meet and greet him. The situation started changing in February. Thackeray's frequent meetings with Sharad Pawar, his new mentor, gave many the impression that he was too heavily under the influence of the NCP chief. His habit of attending office for only four hours a day also became a source of gossip. In March, the state had its first Covid-19 case and very soon Thackeray started confining himself to his home. A heart patient with nine stents in his chest, he now seems to prefer working from home and chooses video conferences over public meetings. However, in his most recent media video briefing on September 13, Thackeray brushed aside the criticism that he was 'not available'. Far from being cut off, he says he reviews the situation in all 36 districts of Maharashtra every day. "I am contacting each district of Maharashtra through video conferencing and the work is happening," he said at a Facebook live event with people on September 13.

PAWAR PLAY

Many of Thackeray's decisions in the first two months of his tenure had Pawar's stamp. He put on hold the permissions given by Fadnavis for development works in cities, ordered an inquiry into the Rs 6,144 crore cost escalation in five irrigation projects and cancelled a guarantee for capital loans worth Rs 135 crore to four cooperative sugar mills controlled by BJP leaders. He also scrapped Fadnavis's policy of independent directors for APMCs (agriculture produce marketing committees).

While cutting his alliance partners slack to exercise their will in administration, Thackeray has also sought to rein them in on occasion. For example, he stayed the transfer of nine deputy commissioners of police (DCPs) in Mumbai on July 6. He was miffed that neither home minister Anil Deshmukh (NCP) nor Mumbai police commissioner Param Bir Singh had consulted him on the transfers. The transfers were executed five days later, but only after Pawar rushed to Thackeray's residence to argue the case. Political commentator Hemant Desai says: "It is a non-issue whether he works from home or not. What is important is that he should be seen as running the government."

T**he transfers episode** is said to have created a rift between Thackeray and Pawar. The NCP chief did not visit Thackeray for two months until September 7 when they met again to discuss the Maratha reservations issue. Meanwhile, in a TV interview, Pawar advised Thackeray to step out of his home and take stock of the pandemic situation in the state. He also expressed displeasure over the BMC (Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation) razing the allegedly unauthorised constructions in Ranaut's house. Shiv Sena MP Sanjay Raut had to call on Pawar thrice seeking a patch-up.

A Thackeray confidant says Pawar gets angry whenever the CM refuses to abide by his wishes. "Uddhav*ji* has shown the guts to say 'no' to Pawar on certain occasions. His (Pawar's) outbursts are a result of that frustration," says the well-wisher. NCP leader Avinash Adik, however, refutes these charges, saying the two have an excellent rapport. "Pawar *saheb* never breached protocol while seeking an appointment. Whenever he feels he needs to apprise the CM on a matter, he calls on him."

The two have disagreed on other issues too. Such as when Thackeray went against Pawar's wishes and refused to withdraw the lockdown completely. He also ensured health secretary Pradeep Vyas took instructions from him, rather than health minister Rajesh Tope of the

THE REPORT CARD

Uddhav Thackeray's record of governance has shown a skew towards welfarist populism. Despite the widely acknowledged success in Dharavi, his interventions to tackle the pandemic have not earned him plaudits

RAJU SANADI

AP

HEATING UP
CM Thackeray on a farm visit in Sangli before the pandemic; a mobile Covid screening van conducts random checks in Mumbai

WHILE CUTTING HIS ALLIANCE PARTNERS SLACK TO EXERCISE THEIR WILL IN ADMINISTRATION, THACKERAY HAS ALSO SOUGHT TO REIN THEM IN ON OCCASION

NCP. The chief minister also made it a point to appoint his favourite bureaucrats in key positions in the Mantralaya.

For his critics, these outbursts of independence are sporadic and unconvincing; for others, it's proof of his malleability and an ability to manage the contradictions of a disparate alliance and the oversized egos of some partners in government. Soon after the reconciliation with Pawar over the police transfers, Thackeray is said to have yielded to pressure from Pawar to transfer Nagpur municipal commissioner Tukaram Mundhe (the CM had earlier announced full support to the official after complaints by the BJP).

CONGRESS'S COMPULSIONS

The NCP is not the only tough ally Thackeray has to deal with. The Congress's decision to join the MVA coalition was purely pragmatic. The party got just 16 per cent of the vote in 2019, its lowest vote share ever, and hopes to recover lost ground with this term in power. "If we can keep the break-even mark of 20 per cent of the vote, we have hope," says a senior Congress leader, requesting anonymity.

The plan looks dicey as the NCP has been dominating the MVA. The Congress is also sceptical about Thackeray's capabilities. According to the leader, Thackeray is not a man to multi-task, or handle too many problems at a time. "If you give him a full *thali*, he will either eat rice or chapati," he says. Congress president Sonia Gandhi, though, is in regular touch with Thackeray through her political secretary Ahmed Patel. She telephoned him on September 9, advising him to be patient in the fracas with Ranaut.

THE MARATHA STORM

The Supreme Court order on September 9 staying reservation for the state's dominant

HITS

CHEAP FOOD

The state's flagship scheme 'Shiv Bhojan' in which a limited plate is served for Rs 5 has been a big success with almost 6 million people taking the meals served in the past six months

RELIEF TO FARMERS

Thackeray has approved loan waivers to 2.95 million farmers so far. He's also asked the agriculture universities to study the produce market and come up with a plan on what kind of crops are best suited for each region

REVENUE REFORMS

A scheme to upgrade farm land records on digital platforms has been introduced. Property registration has also been made easy with online platforms

ENVIRONMENT FIRST

Thackeray has reserved a 600-acre land parcel in Aarey Milk Colony to develop a city forest. A ban on single use plastic and beautification of Mumbai is also on the agenda

BOOST TO SCHOOL EDUCATION

Tili Mili, a state government-run programme on Doordarshan, gives lessons on different subjects to students from Classes 1 to 8. It's been very useful in the lockdown period

MISSES

COVID-19 CAPITAL

With over 1 million cases and 292,000-plus active ones, Maharashtra remains the worst Covid-19 affected state. An ineffectively enforced lockdown and lack of effective medical infrastructure in rural areas have worsened the situation

SLUGGISH INVESTMENTS

The latest ease of doing business index released on September 5 says Maharashtra is still in 13th position. Thackeray says 40,000 acres will be leased to new industries. But with the pandemic spreading, industry is sceptical

SOCIAL QUOTIENT

The Supreme Court decision to disallow reservations for the Marathas has come as a blow to Thackeray

ECONOMIC SLOWDOWN

Maharashtra has 60 per cent revenue shortfall in the current financial year so far. The state's revenue sources are shrinking because of the stalled economic activities, especially in the services sector. To revive the realty sector, Thackeray cut stamp duty by 2% but then hiked circle rates by 2%, leaving the sector miffed

SUSHANT CASE FIASCO

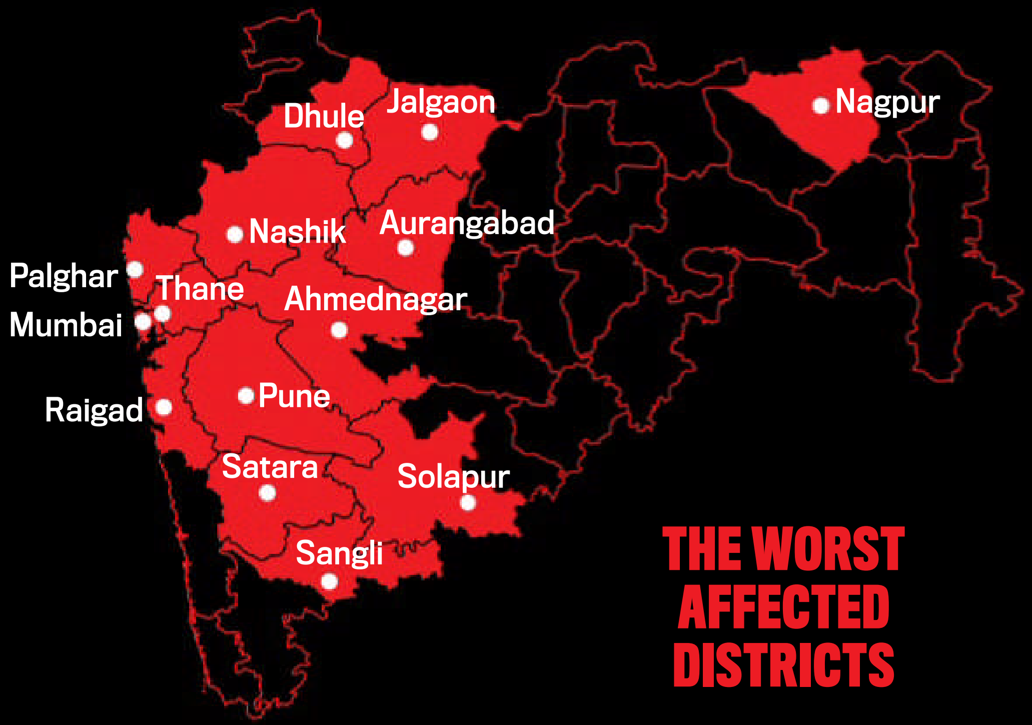
Mumbai police commissioner Param Bir Singh's instructions on not filing an FIR in the Sushant Singh Rajput death case added to the controversy. Then came the SC decision to transfer the case to the CBI, The BMC's public action in razing Kangana Ranaut's unauthorised construction also got too much negative publicity

CALAMITY CONTROL

The eastern parts of Vidarbha were submerged in the floods in late August. Relief work has been shoddy and Thackeray, who didn't even do an aerial survey, released assistance of just Rs 18 crore for the flood affected areas; negligible considering the cyclone-hit Konkan got Rs 700 crore

THE COVID-19 CHALLENGE

With more than 1 million cases and close to 30,000 deaths, Maharashtra continues to remain the Covid-19 hotspot. It has 26.8% of India's active cases



THE WORST AFFECTED DISTRICTS

Maratha community has come as a big jolt to the MVA. The BJP government in 2018 had enacted a law giving Socially and Economically Backward Class (SEBC) status to the 35 per cent Marathas. Under the law, the community would be entitled to 12 per cent reservation in educational institutes and 13 per cent in government jobs. But this raised the reservation quota in the state to 66 per cent, 16 per cent above the ceiling fixed by the SC in 1993.

Thackeray is now taking fire as the SC stayed the implementation of the quota unlike the case in Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh which also face the same issue. The Maratha organisations have now started agitations alleging betrayal by the government. Rajendra Kondhare, president of the Maratha Mahasangh, says the agitation will go on till the government "keeps its word". Stoking the fires, BJP leader Vinod Tawde, who headed a sub-committee on Maratha reservation, alleges that the government deliberately failed in the SC as it wanted to discontinue the reservation. On September 16, Thackeray promised the Maratha community relief till the SC delivers a final verdict. "Why agitate when the government is listening to you?" he asked.

It may be listening now, but the fact is Thackeray was caught unawares as he had left the matter to PWD minister Ashok Chavan (of the Congress), who heads the panel on reservation. The chief minister did not oversee how the lawyers were handling the case. "All matters are not legally resolved. One needs to adopt diplomatic ways too," says a government official.

THE COVID CHALLENGE

With 297,506 active cases and 30,883 deaths till September 17, Maharashtra continues to be the worst-affected state (see *The Covid-19 Challenge*). The virus has now spread to rural areas with 13 of the state's 36 districts recording more than 20,000 cases each.

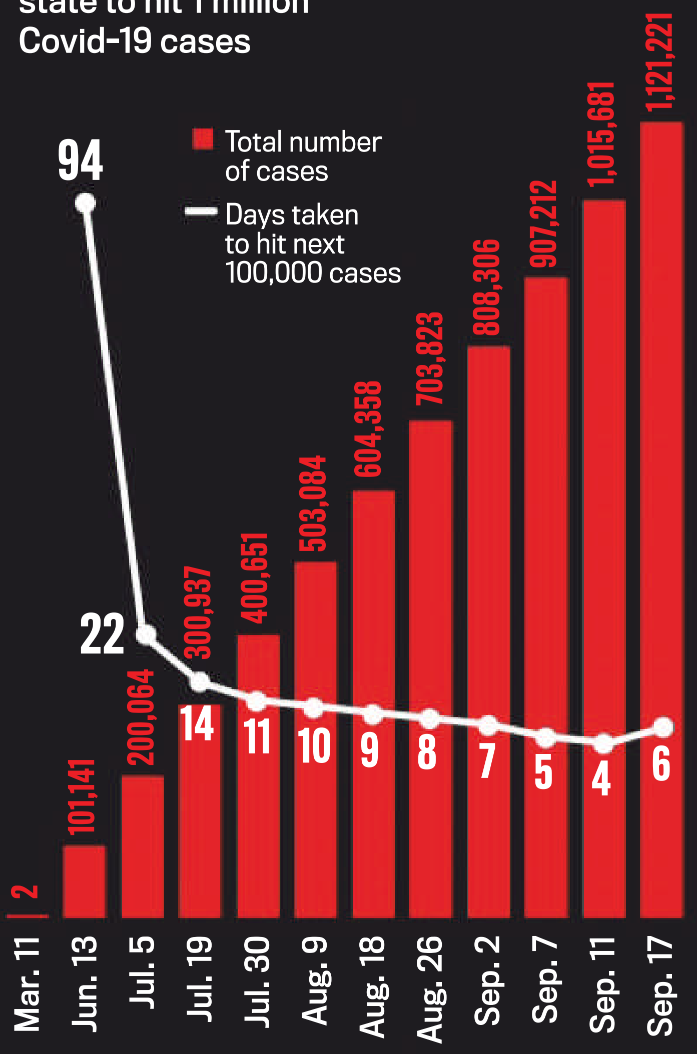
While the government did exemplary work in containing the spread in the slum clusters of Dharavi and Worli, it lowered its guard in other areas with the result that the pandemic spread to Maharashtra's other big cities, home to 25 per cent of the state's population. With 80,152 active cases on September 16, Pune is the worst-affected district in India. There have also been complaints of shortages of doctors, health workers, oxygen cylinders, ambulances and medicines outside Mumbai.

Thackeray has not been sitting idle, though: the 'My Family, My Responsibility' initiative has set a target of reaching 22.5 million families across the state twice a month to check their health status. Volunteers and NGOs will help health officials in door-to-door screening in the first phase that ends on October 10. But the surge in infections is still a worry, and with the Centre stopping the supply of masks, sanitisers and PPE kits, more problems could be in store for the state.

> **THERE IS SPECULATION THAT THE NCP AND CONGRESS COULD BREAK IN DECEMBER, BUT A SENIOR BJP LEADER SAYS THEY'D RATHER NOT FORM A GOVERNMENT WHEN COVID IS STILL RAGING**

GOING VIRAL

Maharashtra is the first state to hit 1 million Covid-19 cases



Source: Dept of public health, Maharashtra

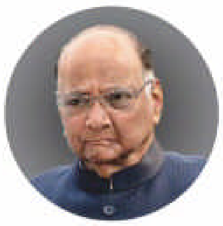
THE CORE VOTERS

The Mumbai Police's shoddy work in the Sushant Singh Rajput case (the actor was found dead in his house on June 14) has embarrassed Thackeray. The Supreme Court, on August 19, handed over the investigation to the CBI (Central Bureau of Investigation). The Sena's brash reaction to Ranaut's comments on the case and the city—demolishing an 'unauthorised' construction at her Bandra office-cum-residence—only made a bad situation worse. A Sena source says the CM was furious when social media and certain TV channels linked son Aaditya Thackeray to Sushant's death. "Who are these journalists? I know who they are working for, I won't spare them," he apparently screamed, alarming even the house staff at Matoshree.

While the Ranaut run-in might have earned Thackeray brownie points with the Sena's core voters, it is not among their real concerns. Party supporters living in Mumbai suburbs are more concerned, for example, about the commute to work as local trains are still running only for essential workers. Kalyan resident Vandana Kadam says she spends six hours a day getting to her office in Dadar and back. "I would be

LEAGUE OF ADVISORS

An introvert, Uddhav Thackeray trusts very few people outside his family members. However, those close to him are powerful enough to run the show



SHARAD PAWAR, NCP chief

The septuagenarian leader has been Thackeray's main guiding force on political issues. Pawar's influence on the government is felt in almost every decision, from appointing secretaries to various departments to policy decisions like scrapping pension to the Emergency warriors. Pawar is also not shy of expressing his displeasure with Thackeray at times

AADITYA THACKERAY, Son and environment minister

Aaditya has been Thackeray's eyes and ears and is present at all important government and political meetings. It was Aaditya's initiative to appoint an agency, owned by his friend, to run Thackeray's personal and official Twitter account. Aaditya's policies on environment and tourism have been the government's showcase efforts

SANJAY RAUT, MP, spokesperson

Sanjay Raut articulates Thackeray's thoughts through the Shiv Sena mouthpiece *Saamna*. He also acts as a bridge between Thackeray and Pawar. One of the few people in the Sena who can call Thackeray by his first name, Raut has the authority to issue statements on behalf of the party chief

AJOY MEHTA, Principal advisor

After three extensions as chief secretary, he has now been accommodated as Thackeray's principal advisor. A sharp administrator, Mehta is known as 'de facto CM' because of his hold on the administration. Thackeray takes policy decisions based on Mehta's briefings, also handles official postings

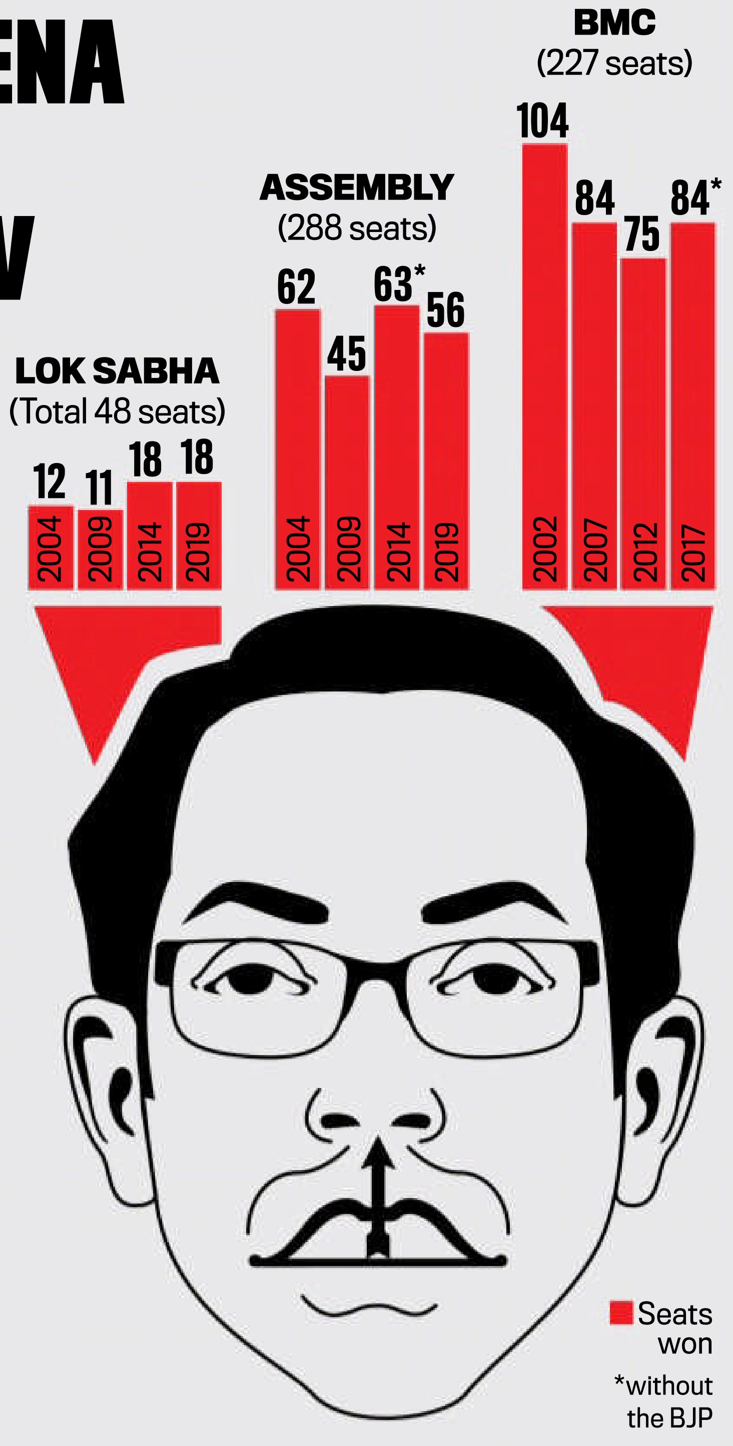
ANIL PARAB, Transport minister

The firebrand leader from Bandra has been Thackeray's man on the ground, coordinating with party workers and keeping everyone happy. As Thackeray's most trusted minister, he also has the task of liaising with other ministers on certain policy matters

Graphics by TANMOY CHAKRABORTY

SHIV SENA UNDER UDDHAV

The Shiv Sena has seen ups and downs under Uddhav Thackeray in the last four Lok Sabha and assembly elections. The party's graph is going down in its stronghold, the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC). Barring the assembly election in 2014 and the BMC election in 2017, it has always allied with the BJP



happy if Uddhav*ji* resolves our commuting woes at the earliest. Kangana and Sushant are okay for small talk but they are not real issues," she says.

POLITICAL STABILITY

State BJP president Chandrakant Patil predicts the Thackeray government will fall early since "there is no coordination" among the MVA partners. There is also speculation that a leader of influence, in both the NCP and Congress, could pull strings, break off a chunk of these parties to merge with the BJP in December, after the assembly election in Bihar. A senior BJP leader, though, says the party will not topple the Thackeray government, as it does not want to run the state while the pandemic is still raging. "We can wait for one more year," he says. Political analyst Mahesh Vijapurkar, too, feels Thackeray is safe politically. "The Congress is confused and the NCP has nowhere to go. Both parties are anti-BJP and hence a security blanket for Uddhav," he says.

ECONOMIC CHALLENGES

The state of the state's $400 billion economy must count among Thackeray's biggest headaches. Maharashtra currently stands at an unflattering No. 13 in the Centre's 'ease of doing business' rankings for states. India's biggest automobile hub at Chakan near Pune has been badly affected by the spread of Covid-19. Industries minister Subhash Desai says some 60,000 industrial units have been allowed to reopen in an attempt to revive the economy. The industry's response has been a bit cold, mainly because many of the returning migrant labourers have tested Covid positive.

The government is worried. "We are considering some incentives for industry, and hope that will boost their confidence," says Desai. Given the unprecedented scale of the challenges presented by the pandemic, many believe the state has done a fair job of handling the economic crisis. "Considering the situation, the Maharashtra government has handled it quite prudently," says Madan Sabnavis, chief economist with Care Ratings. "They have followed a rigorous path in terms of opening up the economy; it may not be ideal from the point of view of the economy, but the government has struck the right balance."

A tussle with the Centre over the GST dues is another cause for heartburn. For 2020-21, Maharashtra was due Rs 22,485 crore in GST compensation, the highest among states. Since the state is not willing to borrow from the RBI as suggested by the Centre, and the latter is unwilling to give funds citing low tax collections, experts say Maharashtra will have no option but to cut down on expenditure, further hurting infrastructure and welfare projects.

In terms of attracting investment, Maharashtra can definitely do better, say experts. "Domestic investors are also looking at other states like Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Telangana. The government cannot sit back and hope investment will flow in automatically," says Sabnavis. While it is true that Covid-19 has left a devastating trail, governments and their chief executives have to do their best to mitigate the damage. Thackeray, it seems, is up for the challenge. "Recently, I have faced many troubles and these political cyclones will continue in the future. But do not consider my silence as helplessness," he said. The chief minister has so far been fairly adept in walking the tightrope, but he will need to act quickly and decisively now, while also ensuring the 'autorickshaw' doesn't go off the road. ■

—with M.G. Arun

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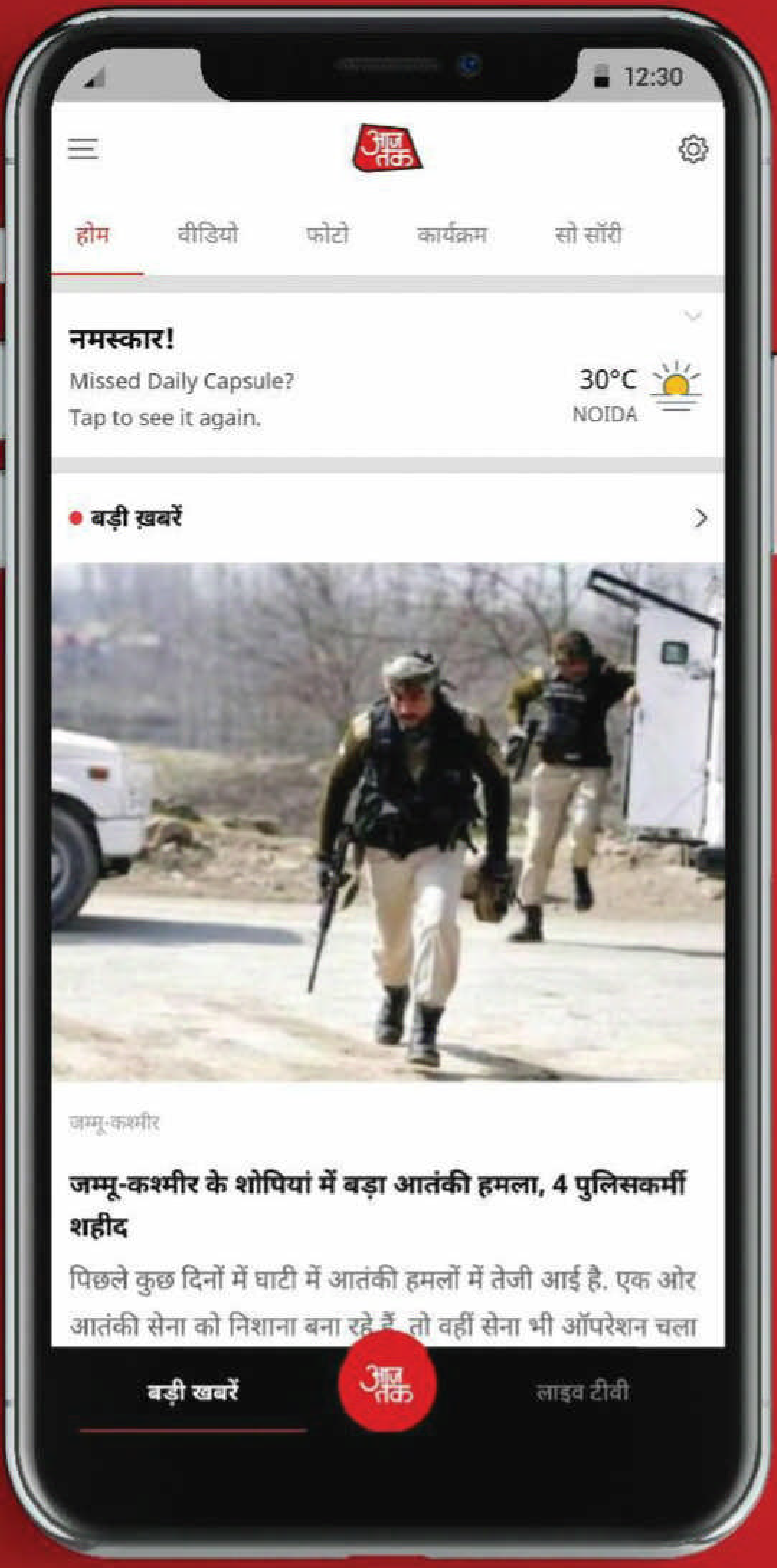

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बड़ी ख़बरें

जम्मू-कश्मीर

जम्मू-कश्मीर के शोपियां में बड़ा आतंकी हमला, 4 पुलिसकर्मी शहीद

पिछले कुछ दिनों में घाटी में आतंकी हमलों में तेजी आई है. एक ओर आतंकी सेना को निशाना बना रहे हैं, तो वहीं सेना भी ऑपरेशन चला

बड़ी खबरें लाइव टीवी

AGRICULTURE REFORMS

FARMERS' MARKET

THREE HOTLY CONTESTED AGRICULTURE SECTOR BILLS, WITH FAR-REACHING CONSEQUENCES FOR FARMERS, ARE IN PARLIAMENT. WHY FARMER GROUPS ARE WORRIED

By Anilesh S. Mahajan

On September 14, as Parliament reconvened for its monsoon session, farmers across Punjab, Uttar Pradesh and Telangana fiercely protested three agriculture-reform bills being tabled by the government. In Punjab, farmers demanded that the legislation (currently in force as ordinances) be immediately repealed. Farmers' groups say the proposed new laws—the Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Bill, the Farmers' (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Bill and the Essential Commodities (Amendment) Bill—will leave them vulnerable to manipulation by the private sector. They say a free (read: unregulated) market will lead to less income security for farmers, and safety nets—such as the MSP (minimum support price) mechanism and regular procurement through APMC (Agricultural Produce and Marketing Committee) *mandis*—will be compromised.

So fierce was the farmers' agitation in Punjab that a core group of the Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD), a long-term BJP ally, prevailed on party chief Sukhbir Badal to publicly oppose the Centre on these bills on September 12, two days before the monsoon session was to begin—despite the fact that Harsimrat Badal, his wife, was a member of the Union cabinet. Pressure built up to a point where Harsimrat Badal found it necessary to resign her cabinet position, 'in protest against anti-farmer ordinances and legislation [and] to stand with farmers as their daughter and sister,' as she later tweeted. While the SAD stand has no real bearing on the passage of these bills—it has only two members each in the houses of Parliament—the optics of a major protest by an ally will trouble the BJP. The Badals now have to walk a tightrope, having already publicly supported the ordinances, with others like Dushyant Chautala in neighbouring

PRABHJOT GILL

UP IN ARMS
Farmers block a bridge near Amritsar during protests against the Centre's agri-reform bills on September 14

Haryana facing similar problems.

Another complicating factor is that these bills have to be cleared in this session of Parliament—provisionally ending on October 1—or the ordinances will lapse. Though they passed the Lok Sabha on September 17, they face another test in the Rajya Sabha next week. Also, significantly, the marketing season for India's kharif crop begins as soon as this session of Parliament ends. Opposition leaders like the Congress's Jairam Ramesh have already made it clear that they oppose the bills. However, putting them on the back foot, on September 14, minister of state for consumer affairs, food and public distribution Raosaheb Danve said the decision to reform agricultural laws had come from the recommendations of a committee that included the chief ministers of Punjab, Haryana, Odisha, Maharashtra, Arunachal Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh. This put Punjab CM Amarinder Singh in a bit of a spot—on August 28, he had a resolution rejecting the ordinances passed in the Punjab assembly.

Why Farmers Worry

A most contentious issue is price security. Farmer groups say the bills allow corporate capital into the market without guarantees of returns on crops. Leaving farmers and buyers free to negotiate 'open market' prices, the subtext of the bill(s) is that these prices need not be linked to government-administered MSPs. There are two sides to this debate. The corporate argument is that quality will be rewarded. Sanjiv Puri, chairman and MD of ITC, one of the country's largest food processing firms, says this is an opportunity for farmers and corporates to collaborate on productivity—better pay for better crop. Farmers say the problem is that corporates have too much power to set prices. Says Jang Bahadur Sangha, a leading farmer from Punjab and one of India's largest growers of potato and maize: "It is almost impossible to get fair prices from corporates. Farmers don't have the financial means to negotiate remunerative prices. It will take time to develop the skills needed to break up corporate cartels, to get the best prices for their products. The history of corporate entry into the farming sector is not a happy one for farmers." So, farmers' groups insist that 'open market' prices must be legally pegged to MSPs, to protect their interests vis-à-vis corporates.

Another major issue relates to the hearing and settlement of disputes. Under the proposed new laws, states are to constitute a 'conciliation board', with district collectors as the final appellate authority. "This means they can't move court [in case of a dispute]," says Congress MP Pratap Singh Bajwa. This provision is even opposed by RSS affiliates like the Bharatiya Kisan Sangh (BKS). "There is a need to protect farmers. [They should not be] left alone to deal with corporate houses, without price guarantees and [with a] faulty dispute settlement mechanism," says BKS general secretary Badri Narayan Chaudhary. In early August, top BJP leadership, including home minister Amit Shah, agriculture and farmers' welfare minister Narendra Tomar and MSME minister Nitin Gadkari were to meet BKS and other RSS affiliates to discuss these issues, but that meeting was cancelled after home minister Shah tested Covid +ve and had to be hospitalised.

Farmer groups also fear that the new bills will lead to the ultimate abolition of the MSP mechanism as well as assured procurement via APMCs. At the very least, they fear these safeguard mechanisms will get so diluted in the proposed new dispensation as to become practically ineffective. The ties that bind farmers and APMC procurement agents are decades old—they are an informal information and support structure, besides being a source of credit to many farmers. Agriculture minister Tomar has laboured the point that the new farm markets will only add to the existing APMC network: "I have repeatedly said this will *supplement* the existing procurement system, not replace it." Government agencies like the FCI (Food Corporation of India) will continue buying from APMCs, he says.

It is not only farmer groups that are worried; state governments, too, fear the loss of revenue and jurisdiction. At the heart of this matter is a technicality—the Centre says these bills regulate 'trade', not 'marketing' of agricultural commodities. Technically, trade is a concurrent list subject, while agriculture marketing is a state prerogative. Under the new law, states cannot levy any market fees, cesses or levies on farmers, traders or electronic trading platforms doing business under the new system. For states like Punjab, Haryana, Chhattisgarh, Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh, which tax APMC transactions, this jeopardises an estimated Rs 12,000 crore of revenue.

FACE TO FACE
A farmers' protest in Haryana's Hisar

MANOJ DHAKA/GETTY IMAGES

THREE BILLS, FOUR POINTS OF VIEW

HOW THE CENTRE SEES IT

The bills seek to open up the farm sector to private investments, allow firms to buy directly from farmers and allow market discovery of prices

HOW FARMERS SEE IT

The bills have no price guarantee mechanism (like MSP), and dispute settlement modes are suspect. Bills have been drafted to favour businesses, leaving farmers vulnerable

HOW CORPORATES SEE IT

Allows corporates to partner with farmers. Knowledge-sharing can bridge gaps between produce and processing requirements

HOW STATES SEE IT

States see a loss of revenues and jurisdiction since the bills bar states from taxing transactions in the new system

The Road Ahead

The current protests notwithstanding, India's agriculture sector, its policies and markets do need reforms. Just before the lockdown, the governments of Punjab and Haryana permitted private players to set up *mandis*; the governments of Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh followed suit. Maharashtra, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu already had similar provisions. Under the new law, anyone with a PAN card can purchase directly from farmers. This allows food processing companies and retailers direct access to farmers and their produce. The new law also allows corporates to enter long-term contracts with farmers, up to a period of five years. The Centre has also been pushing state governments to adopt the model Agriculture Produce and Livestock Marketing Act, 2017, the model Agriculture Produce and Livestock Contract Farming Act, 2018 and the model Agricultural Land Leasing Act, 2016. Contract farming has so far remained a pipe-dream in India, since a large chunk of the country's 200 million farmers do not own the land they farm, and there are no clear laws for the leasing of land for big operations. "There is no going back on these reforms," says noted agriculture economist Tajamul Haque. "But the issues farmer groups are raising do need to be addressed; pricing is a critical one. Leaving that to negotiations between farmers and corporates will be unfair to farmers."

As of September 17, the three bills had been passed by the Lok Sabha, and were to be voted on again in the Rajya Sabha the following week. While the Government looks on course to win the legislative battle, getting stakeholders on board with the reforms will be a stern test of its marketing skills. ■

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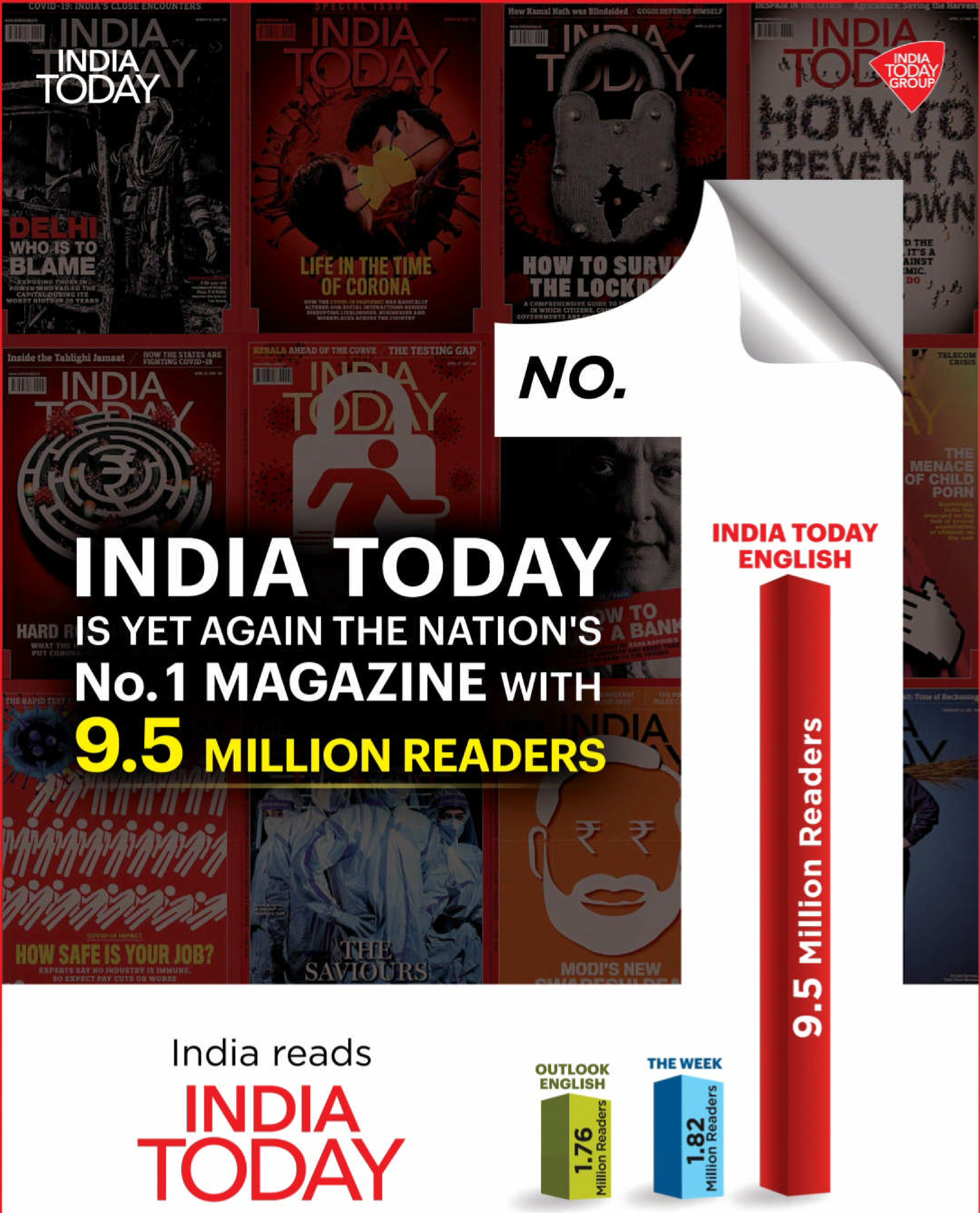

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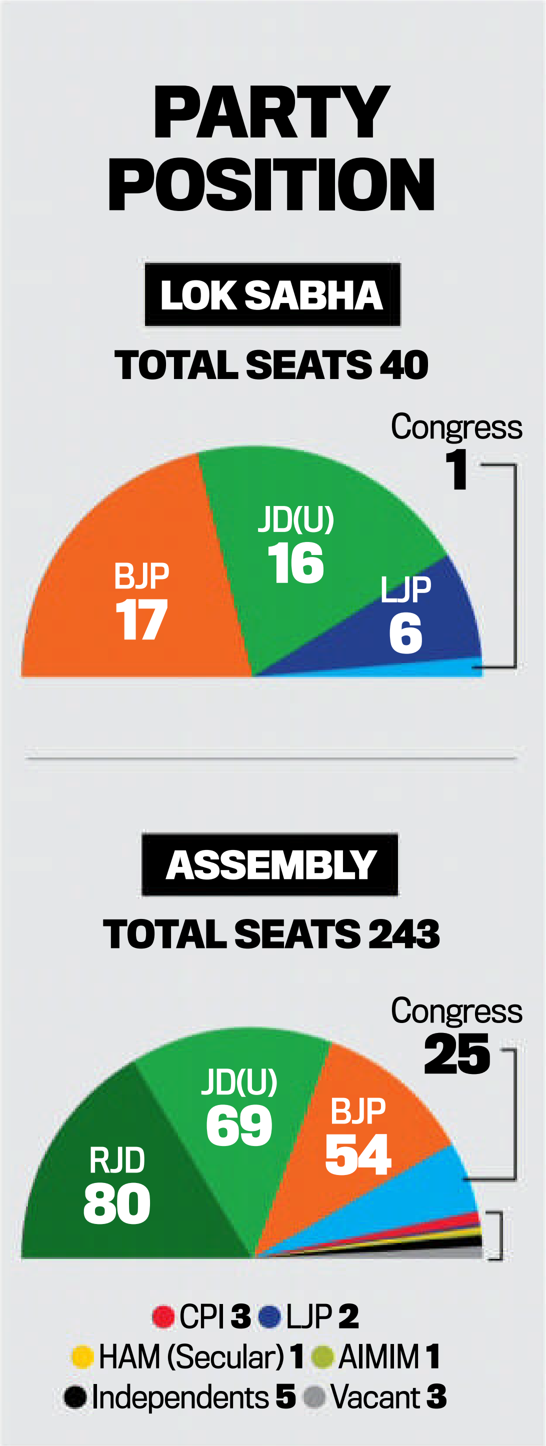
THE BATTLE OF ALLIANCES

The NDA goes into the Bihar election as the clear favourite, buoyed by Nitish's credibility and thanks to the disarray in an RJD-(mis)led opposition. But it needs to quickly iron out differences among its two main constituents over seat distribution

By Amitabh Srivastava

On September 10, as Prime Minister Narendra Modi digitally launched the Rs 20,050 crore Pradhan Mantri Matsya Sampada Yojana, a central government scheme to boost production and exports in the fisheries sector, he began his address in Bhojpuri—"*Rauaa sabe ke pranam ba* (*Pranam* to all of you)". Minutes into his address, Modi picked "Nitish babu" for special praise, lauding, among other achievements, the Bihar chief minister's success in bringing piped water to nearly 70 per cent of homes in the state. On September 13, while inaugurating three petroleum projects in Bihar, Modi endorsed Nitish again and said that his 15-year rule had shown how development could be fast-tracked by adopting the right governance model.



Graphic by TANMOY CHAKRABORTY

These were official programmes, but Modi's efforts to connect with poll-bound Bihar and hardsell old ally Nitish were more than obvious. Five years ago, the Bihar assembly election scene was altogether different. The National Democratic Alliance (NDA) had then run a determined campaign, led by the prime minister himself, against the grand alliance of Nitish's Janata Dal (United) or JD(U), the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) and the Congress—and failed. The BJP had contested 157 of the total 243 assembly seats—drawing over 9.3 million votes, the highest among all parties in that election—but could win only 53. The other three constituents added just five seats to the NDA tally.

Much has changed since then. Nitish is back in the NDA fold, since August 2017, and is seeking a fourth term in office with the help of the very party that had unsuccessfully challenged him in 2015. The last time the BJP and the JD(U) contested Bihar assembly elections together was in 2010, gliding to power with a tally of 206 seats between them.

The current term of the legislative assembly ends on November 29 and Bihar's parties and alliances are in poll gear. BJP national president J.P. Nadda met Nitish in Patna on September 12 amid speculation about seat distribution within the NDA. The other two NDA constituents, Ram Vilas Paswan's Lok Janshakti Party (LJP) and new entrant Hindustani Awam Morcha (Secular) of former chief minister Jitan Ram Manjhi, were not part of the meeting. For the Lok Sabha election last year, then BJP chief Amit Shah and Nitish had met as early as in October 2018 and declared that their parties would contest an equal number of seats.

THE POWER OF TWO

While the BJP and JD(U) are tight-lipped about their seat distribution parleys, Nadda has reiterated that the NDA will contest the election under the leadership of Nitish and aim for a two-thirds majority. Going by past elections in Bihar, the BJP and the JD(U) are a formidable force when contesting together. This broadly attests Bihar deputy chief minister Sushil Modi's view that whenever two of the state's three main parties form a poll alliance, it is hard to beat. "Ever since the hung assembly verdict in February 2005, Bihar's voters have been delivering decisive mandates in both assembly and Lok Sabha elections—in favour of Nitish Kumar for the assembly and Narendra Modi for the Lok Sabha," says a senior JD(U) leader.

Between October 2005 and May 2019, Bihar witnessed three assembly and three parliamentary elections. In these six contests, the BJP and the JD(U) were in alliance on four occasions—the 2005 and 2010 assembly and 2009 and 2019 Lok Sabha elections—and notched convincing victories each time. Nitish emerged winner in all the three assembly elections during this period whereas the NDA swept Bihar in two of the three Lok Sabha polls.

In 2009, even when Modi was not on the national political scene and the UPA (United Progressive Alliance) won the Lok Sabha election and returned to power, the JD(U)-BJP combine had won 32 of the 40 seats, with a 13 percentage point higher vote share than the RJD-LJP alliance. The NDA maintained the vote-share lead in the 2010 assembly election as well—39.1 per cent against the UPA's 25.6 per cent. In the 2019 Lok Sabha election, which the BJP and JD(U) contested along with the LJP, the NDA had a 23 percentage point higher vote share than the grand alliance.

In the 2015 assembly election, when the JD(U) and the RJD joined hands along with the Congress, the grand alliance vote share was 7.75 percentage points higher than the NDA's. The JD(U), RJD and the Congress together bagged 178 seats against the NDA's 58, which included two seats each of the LJP and Rashtriya Lok Samata Party (RLSP) and one of HAM (Secular). No wonder, both the JD(U) and the BJP will walk the extra mile to be in each other's company in Bihar.

TUSSLE FOR SEATS

The NDA's immediate priority will be to arrive at an amicable distribution of seats among the constituents. In the 2010 assembly election, the JD(U) had fielded 141 candidates and the BJP 102. In the 2019 general election, the two parties contested 17 seats each. With the BJP winning all 17 seats and the JD(U) one less, the two parties are arguably on an even keel. As negotiations proceed, some in the state BJP feel their party deserves a bigger share of seats than in 2010. But as a JD(U) leader says: "Assembly polls are all about electing a chief minister." This is where Nitish's party believes it holds the trump card.

Tejashwi Yadav is hardselling a vision of a 'new Bihar'. With 24 per cent of the electorate under 30 years, he has been raising the issue of lack of jobs

Some state BJP leaders claim their party had agreed to contest just 17 Lok Sabha constituencies in 2019 despite having 22 sitting MPs since the JD(U) wished to fight from at least 17 seats. They argue that the BJP and the JD(U) should be contesting an equal number of assembly seats as Nitish's party had a similar arrangement with the RJD in the 2015 poll.

The BJP is reportedly seeking 100 assembly seats each for itself and the JD(U), with the remaining 43 distributed between the LJP and HAM (Secular). A senior JD(U) leader, however, rejected the proposal, saying: "Our 2015 arrangement with the RJD cannot be replicated with the BJP this time for various reasons. For one, the RJD is a regional party whereas the BJP is a national political entity. Second, in the grand alliance set-up, we had trust over our third constituent, the Congress. We cannot say the same for the LJP."

Relations between the JD(U) and the LJP have been frosty, of late. At one point, the LJP had even threatened to field candidates against the JD(U) in the forthcoming election and the latter had retorted that the two parties were no longer in an alliance.

LJP chief Chirag Paswan is said to be miffed over PM Modi's recent praise of Nitish. While Chirag has said his party will stand by "whatever decision the BJP takes", the JD(U) has little trust in him. The party is also wary of a situation where the LJP wins a sizeable number of seats and begins to assert itself during government formation.

OPPOSITION IN A MUDDLE

To the NDA's advantage, the RJD-led opposition is perceived to be in a shambles. RJD chief Lalu Prasad Yadav is in judicial custody in Ranchi following his conviction in fodder scam cases. His son Tejashwi Yadav, who is leading the party, is no match for his father's rallying influence. With 80 seats, the RJD is the largest entity in the current Bihar assembly.

The opposition alliance has not only lost Manjhi's party, it is also grappling with demanding allies, such as Upendra Kushwaha's RLSP and Mukesh Sahani's Vikassheel Insaan Party (VIP). The RJD is keen on a rainbow alliance that not only gives it traction among castes like the Kushwaha and Sahni but also attracts Left votes. Tejashwi, though, faces the difficult task of accommodating Left parties like the CPI, CPI(M) and CPI(M-L) and balancing it with the aspirations of old allies, such as the Congress. The RJD also realises that packing the alliance

ANI

POLL SEASON Bihar chief minister Nitish Kumar and his deputy Sushil Kumar Modi with BJP national president J.P. Nadda (centre) in Patna on September 12

with so many constituents may ultimately bring down its own share of seats. While the allies have their own ambitious demands, the RJD is unwilling to settle for anything less than 145-150 seats to contest in the election.

For the RJD, the biggest challenge perhaps is to rid itself of the baggage of the past, including widespread corruption charges against its first family. Nitish's parting of ways with the RJD in 2017, which brought down the grand alliance government in Bihar, had come in the aftermath of fresh corruption charges against Lalu and Tejashwi.

Tejashwi has been trying hard to change the perception of his party from the time it was led by Lalu and Rabri Devi. In July, he unconditionally apologised to the people of Bihar for the 'mistakes' committed by the RJD government during its 15-year rule in the state, at the same time crediting his father with ushering in social justice. RJD sources say Tejashwi is trying to build a vision of a 'new Bihar' and projecting himself as a youth icon. Incidentally, almost 24 per cent of Bihar's registered electorate is below 30 years. It perhaps explains why Tejashwi has been raising the issue of unemployment in the state.

To Tejashwi's discomfiture, the NDA is projecting brand Nitish and 15 years of Bihar's progress under the chief minister, and comparing it with the perceived 15-year misrule of the RJD. Tejashwi also has his hands full battling turmoil within the RJD. While there has been no formal announcement, word is out that his elder brother Tej Pratap Yadav has made up his mind to change his assembly constituency from Mahua to Hasanpur in Samastipur district. This is reportedly prompted by speculation that Tej Pratap's estranged wife Aishwarya may contest against him from Mahua. This has not exactly been the confidence-building step that party supporters were hoping for.

The death of RJD veteran Raghuvansh Prasad Singh on September 13 will also impact the RJD's bid to gain ground among the upper castes. Though a socialist leader, Singh had emerged as a symbol of Rajput pride, and the JD(U) is doing everything to beat the RJD in the game of claiming his legacy. What may have gone against the RJD is that Tej Pratap had, in the past, reacted to speculation about Singh leaving the party by remarking that it would have no impact on a "vast ocean like the RJD". Though he retracted the comment and described Singh as his "*chacha*", the damage was done.

The bottomline is that while the RJD may want the electorate to buy what Tejashwi is promising to deliver in the future, the JD(U) and the BJP are going all out to remind the people of Bihar of the RJD's past. In between lies present-day Bihar, with one of the two time-periods set to become the deciding factor in the upcoming election. ■

“Will accept Rahul Gandhi, or anyone, as party president if he gets elected”

GHULAM NABI AZAD is no ordinary Congress leader. A former Union minister and chief minister, he has worked closely with three generations of the Gandhi family, starting with Indira Gandhi. Often termed a leader with no mass base, Azad, Leader of the Opposition in the Rajya Sabha, has been instrumental in several big victories for the party and has the unique distinction of handling all state units as party in-charge. He supervised Sonia Gandhi's election campaign when she contested from Bellary in Karnataka, and was among the proposers when Rahul Gandhi filed his nomination for the post of Congress president. So, when the family loyalist emerged as the unofficial leader of a group of 23 Congressmen who, in a letter to Sonia, demanded reforms within the party, it sent shock waves across the party. Azad, however, refuses to call himself a “rebel”. In an exclusive interview with Deputy Editor KAUSHIK DEKA, the 71-year-old Congressman reveals the rationale behind the letter and the future course of action. Excerpts

Q. For the first time in nearly four decades, you are not a Congress general secretary. Is this the price for writing the letter?

A. I have been requesting the Congress president since 2004 to relieve me as general secretary. I was a general secretary for many years under several Congress presidents, starting with Rajiv Gandhi. As the AICC in-charge, I have the unique distinction of handling all states and UTs in India. But, as I grow older, I have family commitments. And it is now difficult for me to devote the kind of attention and hard work I could earlier. However, that request was not accepted. Despite my reluctance, I was made general secretary in-charge of Uttar Pradesh in 2016 and of Haryana in 2019. I'm happy that the Congress president has finally agreed to give me the much-needed rest. It's not an act of vengeance but kindness. The entire Gandhi family has been extremely warm and receptive to me, even after we wrote the letter.

Q. Are you happy with the new CWC?

A. I don't want to comment on that as it's a temporary reshuffle. In the CWC meeting on August 24, it was decided the election for the post of party president would happen within six months. Soniaji and Rahul Gandhi wanted it to happen by October, but P. Chidambaram and I pointed out it wasn't possible because of the pandemic. Once a new president is elected, the current CWC gets dissolved and, as mandated by the party constitution, new CWC members and AICC office bearers will have to appointed.

CHANDRADEEP KUMAR

them were prime ministers too. Let me give you Indira Gandhi's example. Six days a week, despite being the PM, she used to meet hundreds of people at her residence for two hours. Nobody needed a prior appointment. She would often pick a dozen from among these people for one-on-one conversations for an hour. It was her way to take honest feedback on the government and the party. Party workers and leaders didn't have to wait for more than 2-3 days to get an appointment. All this was possible because she worked from eight in the morning to two at night. That's the template of an active and available leader. There was a hierarchy, but also strong personal bonds and easy accessibility. Unfortunately, it's not there in any party in India now.

Q. How did you suddenly realise that the Congress doesn't have an active, available leadership?
A. When the party is in power, it flows with public support. The introspection happens when you are out of power. We have lost two consecutive elections. It's time for us to introspect. I wish we had raised the issue 10 years ago. We are all responsible for the decline of the party. But once we have identified the ailments, we must now start the treatment.

Q. If the election is to happen in the next six months, why did Sonia Gandhi reshuffle the CWC?
A. It will not be appropriate for me to comment on a decision taken by the Congress president. If she is comfortable with these temporary appointments, I have no objection. She has to run the organisation, not me.

Q. Why is it important to have an election when Sonia Gandhi has been party president for two decades?
A. Last year, when Rahul Gandhi quit as Congress president, the CWC requested Sonia Gandhi to take charge as the interim president. While accepting our request, she said she would not like to continue beyond a period of one year. With that year ending on August 10, it was important to elect a new president. Rahul Gandhi had made it clear he does not want to return as Congress president for a reasonable period of time. So we needed to elect a third person. It was in this context that we wrote the letter to Mrs Gandhi demanding a full-time president. Unfortunately, it coincided with her illness.

Q. And if Rahul Gandhi agrees to return as president now?
A. The election of the Congress president will take place within six months. If the elected delegates of AICC and PCC elect him, we will have no problem. We will stand solidly behind any elected president.

Q. You also demanded an active and available president? What did you mean by that?
A. I have worked under six Congress presidents and three of

Q. You demanded a collective leadership at the top. Does the six-member advisory committee address the issue? Doesn't the CWC represent collective leadership?
A. That issue was raised in a different context. Nobody in the party, including Priyanka Gandhi, has what Sonia Gandhi and Rahul Gandhi have—a unique combination of aura and experience. So, to help the new president lead the party without any difficulty, we proposed the concept of collective leadership. The party constitution says 50 per cent of the CWC members should be elected. If all members are nominated, they remain in office at the mercy of the president and lack authority. It means they may not speak their minds in party deliberations.

Q. You were a nominated member. Did you have a problem in speaking your mind?
A. My case was different. I was nominated by Sonia Gandhi but was also elected to the CWC in 1992 and 1997 against the wishes of the then party president. But everyone is not Ghulam Nabi Azad. Besides it's a constitutional requirement of the party to have 50 per cent elected members in the CWC.

Q. You want organisational elections in Congress and yet you blame the same process—introduced by Rahul Gandhi—for the downfall of the Youth Congress. Isn't this a contradiction?
A. Elections, specially at the block, district and state levels, are important since it's not possible for the party president to have a micro-understanding of every block and district. There has been too much centralisation of decision-making. I would

CHANDRADEEP KUMAR

> “The party is my family. I want to pass on the legacy of our ideological conviction to committed party workers who can rise through an elected set-up

again like to give the example of Indira Gandhi. Unlike what many like to believe, she was the most democratic leader. As a Youth Congress president, I did not need to take her approval to appoint any office bearer at any level. Now, every decision is referred to the Congress president. Sadly, this centralisation ails all political parties. Having said that, organisational elections need to follow certain norms. To fight organisational elections in the party, one needs to be a primary member and gain experience. The candidate has to be nominated by delegates. But in the Youth Congress, in the current form, anyone can stand for the post of president, irrespective of any commitment to party ideology or experience in working at the grassroots. It is important to fix eligibility criteria. For instance, to contest for the post of Youth Congress president, one must spend at least two years as general secretary.

Q. Your critics say you’ve enjoyed good positions in the Congress, and now that those positions are slipping away, you have raised the banner of revolt, and that it is a ploy to stop Rahul Gandhi from becoming Congress president.

A. I have literally given my blood and sweat to the party. I have been to jail so many times, even with Sanjay Gandhi and Indira Gandhi. As general secretary in-charge of Punjab, I survived many attacks by militants. The constant travelling took a toll on my health. These personal sacrifices resulted in sweet results for the party. We brought the Congress back to power in Punjab. Andhra Pradesh gave the Congress maximum seats in 2004, building the base for the UPA. From Kerala and Karnataka to Uttarakhand and Jammu and Kashmir, there have been so many instances when I was instrumental in turning around the fate of the party and forming the government. In 2002, when I took charge as PCC president of J&K, Congress came to power for the first time since 1975. As far as hankering for any position is concerned, history is witness to several instances where I voluntarily gave up positions. I resigned from Rajiv Gandhi’s cabinet to work for the party. Not many know that it was my idea to join hands with the PDP and share power in 2002, which cost me the chief minister’s chair. So, it’s this lack of knowledge about my past that is making people level such wild allegations. I’m 71 now. What more can I do except wish for a stronger Congress? The party is my family. I want to pass on the legacy of our hard work and ideological conviction to committed party workers who can rise through an elected set-up. That was the purpose of the letter. In India, there are parties that believe in divisive politics based on religion, caste and region. In contrast, Congress is the cementing force India needs today. We wanted to create a cadre that would carry forward the party’s legacy. If that’s seen as being a rebel, what can we do? The letter was not against any individual, including Rahul Gandhi. We are reformists, not rebels.

Q. You and Anand Sharma are now in the CWC. Mukul Wasnik is in the advisory committee to the party president. Jitin Prasada has been given charge of West Bengal. Is this to break up the (rebel) letter-writers?

A. We are in the Congress, not in some other party. So, it’s natural that some of us would get some responsibilities. Raising certain questions about the organisation doesn’t mean we have left or have been thrown out of the party.

Q. What if your demands are not met within six months?

A. During a pandemic, we don’t know what will happen next week. A six-month deadline is far away. Let us first overcome bigger challenges such as Covid, economy, Chinese aggression as one, united Congress party. The president will be elected within six months. We will take up the other issues with the next president. These reforms need a lot of preparation and time to get implemented.

Q. Your critics say you don't have mass support and that this was a drawing-room revolt. Your views?

A. Please check the results of the 2006 and 2008 J&K Assembly elections. How many leaders in India have won from their constituencies with 94 per cent of the votes polled? In my entire political career, I have never got so many supportive phone calls and messages [as I have] since our letter became public. The ideas in the letter have found strong resonance among Congress workers and the general public. Having known how the party functions, the response has been way beyond our expectation. ■

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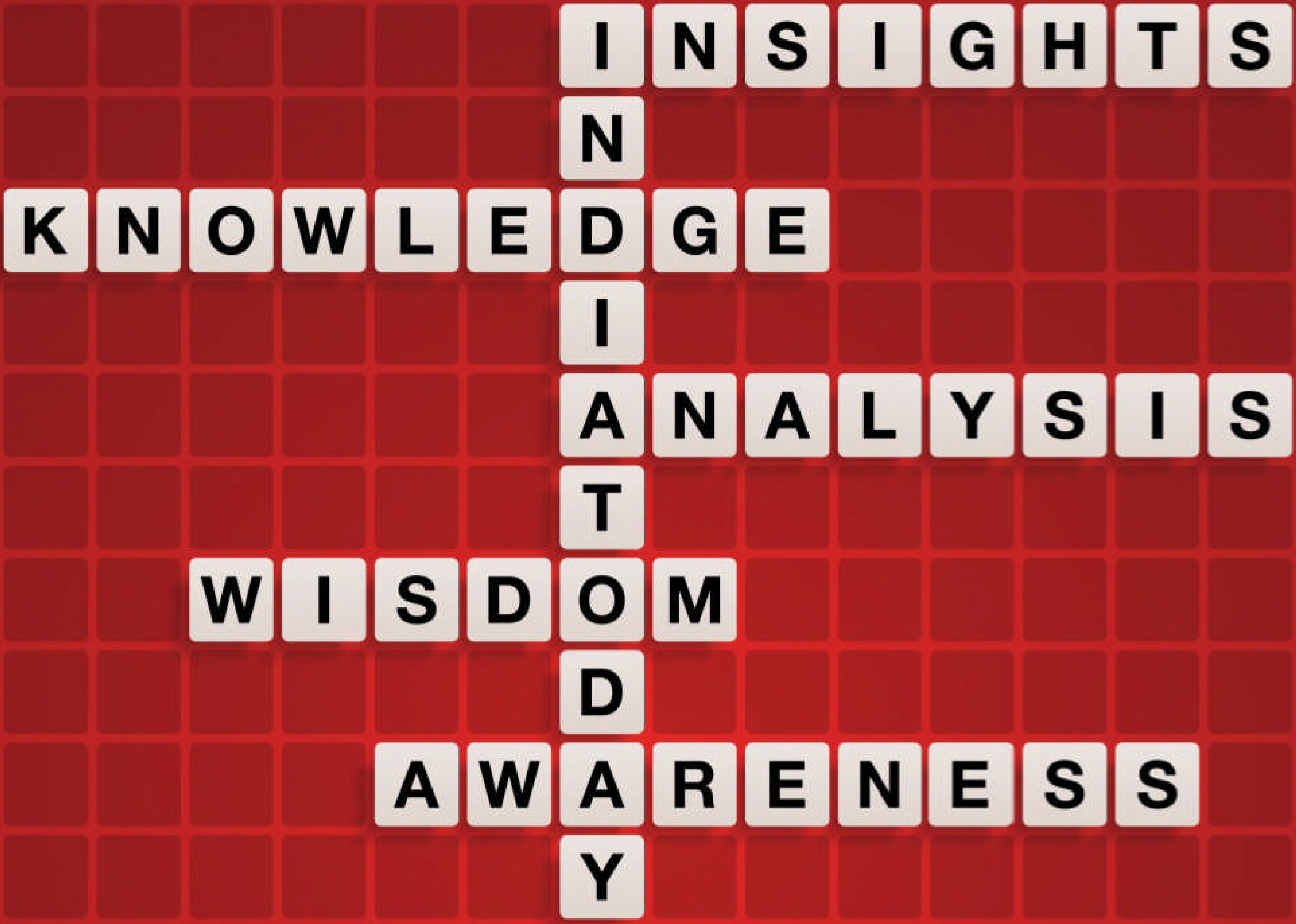
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Why Social Media Wants You Angry

How the business models of social media platforms thrive on anger, hatred and the divisive fake narratives often spread by political parties

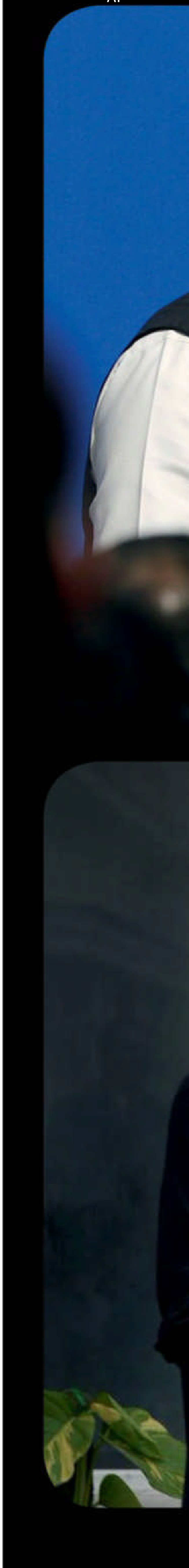
By **KAUSHIK DEKA**

In **June 2019, during the first Parliament session** after the BJP's return to power at the Centre with an enhanced majority, Derek O'Brien of the Trinamool Congress (TMC) raised four questions in the Rajya Sabha that suggested that the saffron party had won the general election by "creating a culture of digital mobs, conditioning minds and spreading fake news". In short, he alleged that the BJP's victory was aided by social media manipulation. Fourteen months on, allegations by O'Brien have hit the ruling party again following foreign media reports about how social media giant Facebook has been allegedly favouring the BJP. A report by *The Wall Street Journal* details how Ankhi Das, Facebook's public policy director for India and south and central Asia, failed to take down Telangana BJP MLA T. Raja Singh's account despite his transgression of hate-speech norms.

Another report by Buzzfeed News details the allegations made by Sophie Zhang, a data scientist recently fired by Facebook, in a 6,600-word memo this August criticising the company for overlooking evidence that the platform was used to sway public opinion and manipulate elections globally. Among various examples, she mentioned a "politically-sophisticated" network attempting to influence the Delhi assembly election in February. Zhang did not disclose the identity of the network.

Referring to Raja Singh's account, which Facebook eventually took down, the company's India MD Ajit Mohan said in an interview to *The Times of India*: "If it's the speech of an elected official, the idea is that the voters and constituents should be able to make a call for themselves in terms of the nature of that speech...we should not be in a position, which is possible, of censorship of speech from elected officials or political leaders. But having said that, there is no exception for hate speech and, therefore, even in this case, going back to 2018, we have taken down content that violated our community standards on the platform."

In response to Zhang's allegations, Facebook


AP

POWER MEET (Top) PM Narendra Modi with Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg at the company's headquarters in California, Sept. 2015; Rahul Gandhi with Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey in New Delhi, Nov. 2018

THE SOCIAL MEDIA UNIVERSE

Active social media population

WORLD

3.96
BILLION
46% of the total population

INDIA

376.1
MILLION
28% of the total population

17 **HOURS**
Average time Indian social media users spend on platforms each week, more than social media users in China and the US

₹3,835
CRORE
Or 28% of the total digital ads, worth Rs 13,683 crore, spent on social media in 2019

98%
of **Facebook's** global revenue comes from advertisements

87%
of **Twitter's** revenue came from advertisements; 13% came from data licensing

Sources: Digital India: Technology to Transform a Connected Nation by McKinsey Global Institute, 2019; Digital Advertising Report 2020 by Dentsu Aegis Network India; Facebook; Twitter said the company regularly removed coordinated influence campaigns. Predictably, a war of words erupted between the BJP government and the Opposition over the reports. The Congress and the TMC wrote to Facebook demanding that the allegations be scrutinised. In another letter to Facebook, Ravi Shankar Prasad, the Union minister for law & justice, communications and electronics & IT, claimed that its employees were “on record” abusing Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his cabinet colleagues and that these biases reflected in the social media platform’s operations.

The controversy indicates how social media fashions narratives. Platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube and instant messaging app WhatsApp, have not only democratised public opinion but also spurred political and social movements—protests in Iran over rigging of the 2009 presidential election, Arab Spring in Egypt (2010), Anna Hazare’s anti-corruption movement (2011) and the Nirbhaya gang-rape protests (2012), to name a few.

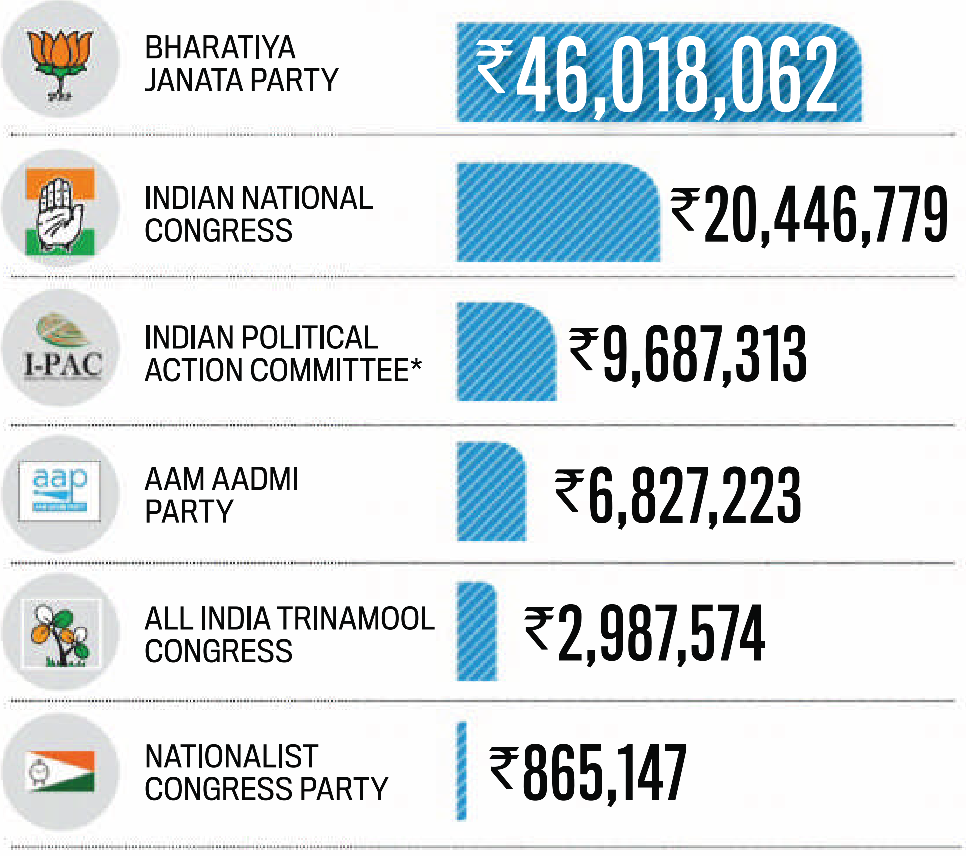
Over the years, spontaneous public opinion on social media has given way to curated discourses orchestrated by political parties, groups, individuals and corporate houses, often determining which narrative will get national attention. For billions, social media has become the primary source of information, giving it unprecedented power to influence the discourse in almost every aspect of mass communication. “Social media discourse may not reflect the real public mood, but it does affect the minds of users. People fear they would be ostracised if they are not part of the popular or majoritarian narrative on an issue,” says Priyanka Chaturvedi, deputy leader of the Shiv Sena in the Rajya Sabha.

Chaturvedi cites the case of actor Sushant Singh Rajput’s death to add: “So many Twitter accounts came up just to tweet on the case, creating an impression that this was the most hotly discussed issue on social media, whereas other important issues do not get the same attention.” Just how a ‘national narrative’ can be built through social media is evident from the trending Twitter hashtag #CBIForSSR—in support of a CBI inquiry into Rajput’s death—that has generated nearly 3 million tweets.

Social media platforms have often faced accusations of cultivating narratives in exchange for money or favours. The networks were seen as taking little tangible action when fake narratives for and against the CAA (Citizenship Amendment

THE FACEBOOK ADVERTISERS

Some of the political party pages that paid the highest ad revenue to the social media giant between February 8, 2019 and September 5, 2020

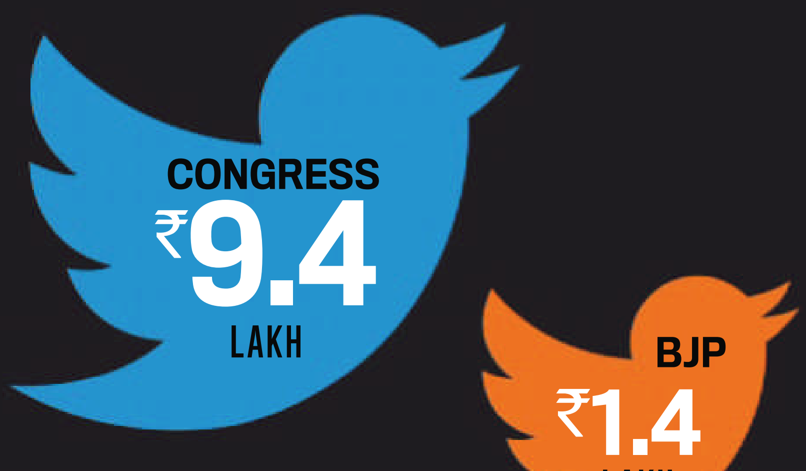


*Owned by election strategist Prashant Kishor, I-PAC has been hired by AAP, YSRCP and TMC

₹62.1 CRORE spent on ads related to social issues, elections or politics on Facebook between February 8, 2019 and September 5, 2020

THE TWITTER ADVERTISERS

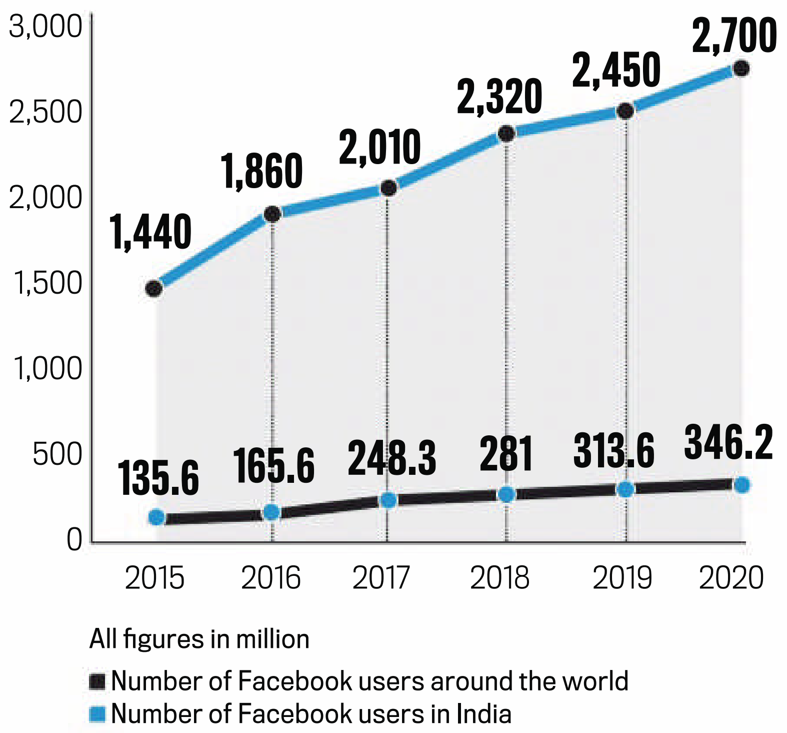
This is one platform where the Congress beats the BJP in ad spend



Ad spend during 2019 Lok Sabha election

THE EXPANSION OF FACEBOOK

Launched in 2004, Facebook occupies 68 per cent of the social media space worldwide



HOW FACEBOOK MAKES MONEY

Facebook makes most of its money by customising ads. Advertisers pay Facebook to make their ads visible to potential customers. Facebook does not share data of users with advertisers. Instead it does a profiling of users as per the requirements of advertisers. Most ads are 'pay per click', i.e. advertisers pay Facebook each time a person clicks on an ad. Social media experts say discord, outrage and polarisation increase users' time spend on social media, which results in viewing more ads. As WhatsApp doesn't earn any significant revenue, industry insiders speculate that Facebook acquired the messenger app to access more intimate behavioural data and personal information of a large base of users. Facebook also makes money by selling virtual reality headset Oculus. It is expanding into services like online payments, e-commerce and business messaging.

Act) and NRC (National Register of Citizens) spread, even stoking violence. When hate speeches by politicians amplified during the Delhi election this year and the riots that followed, social media platforms remained mute spectators.

As usual, political parties trade charges instead of ending this spiteful game. If Congress spokesperson Supriya Shrinate has claimed that Ankhi Das's sister was an activist of the RSS-affiliated Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad, BJP IT cell head Amit Malviya alleged that Siddharth Majumdar, a Facebook executive, is associated with the Congress. "At first, it was about the platform being misused. Now, it's about Facebook misusing the platform," says Nikhil Pahwa, founder of MediaNama, a mobile and digital news portal. "We do not exactly know the accusations of biases against the BJP or the Congress [within Facebook] because these have been anecdotal. This is why we need greater scrutiny of large platforms like Facebook." Facebook did not respond to queries from INDIA TODAY.

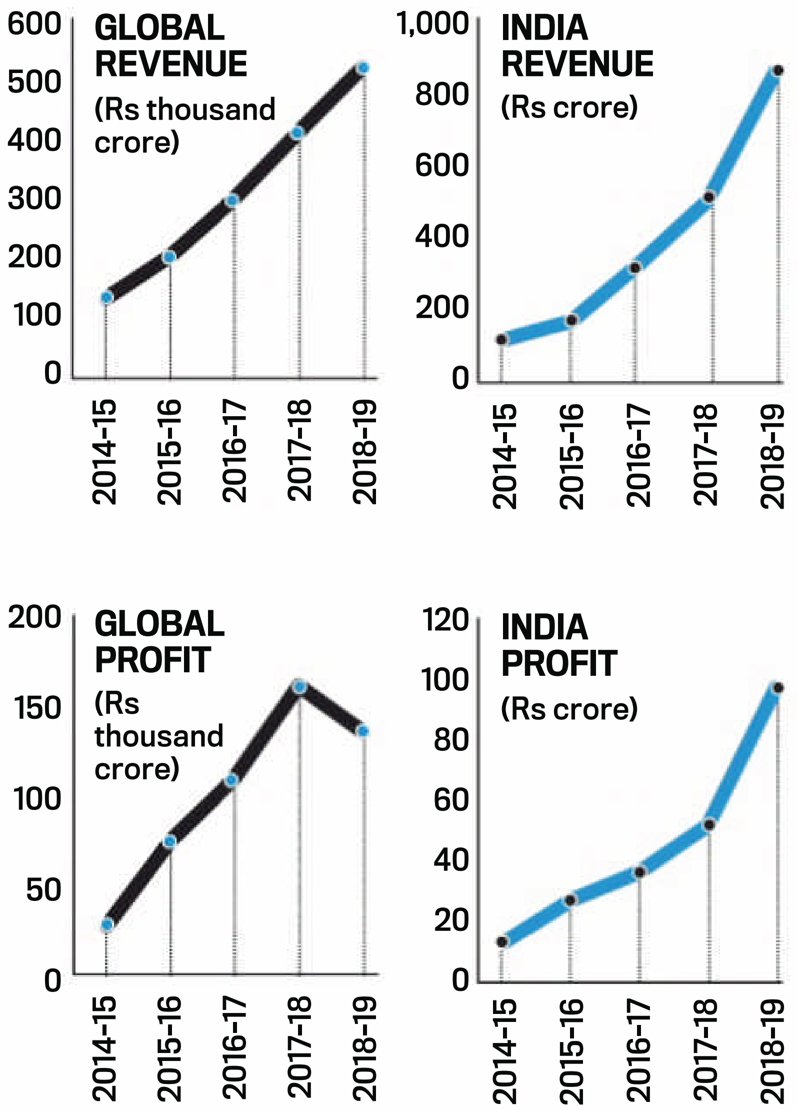
Prasad, in his letter to Facebook, not only dismissed "the spate of anonymous, source-based reports" as a power struggle within Facebook for ideological hegemony, but even claimed that the Facebook India team is dominated by people with a certain political leaning. "We have seen in India that right from the assessors for on-boarding fact-checkers to the fact-checkers themselves, harbour publicly expressed political biases," wrote Prasad, demanding action against "anarchic and radical elements" who use Facebook to "destroy social order, recruit people and assemble them for violence". Prasad did not respond to a questionnaire sent by INDIA TODAY.

THE MISINFORMATION WAVE

The use of social media platforms for hate mongering and pushing fake news has been a rapidly growing problem.

FACEBOOK'S EARNINGS AND PROFITS

Though Facebook has the largest user base in India, the country accounts for less than 1 per cent of the social media platform's global profits



OTHER PLAYERS IN THE FACEBOOK STABLE

INSTAGRAM

Launched in 2010, it was acquired by Facebook in 2012 for $1 billion

1 Billion
GLOBAL USERS

100 Million
INDIAN USERS

WHATSAPP

Launched in 2009, it was acquired by Facebook in 2014 for $19 billion

2 Billion
GLOBAL USERS

400 Million
INDIAN USERS

India has witnessed mob lynchings and communal violence incited by fake news or hate messages on WhatsApp, Facebook and other networks, and the platforms have been found wanting in action.

Such reluctance seems to be mostly driven by commercial interest. Most social media platforms depend on ads for revenue. Most ads are 'pay per click', meaning advertisers pay the platform each time a person clicks on their ads. This makes the duration of user engagement crucial. Digital communication experts say discord, outrage and polarisation evoke intense emotions in users, increasing the time they spend on social media. "Social media platforms have changed their algorithm to increase the engagement of users. Those who have cracked the algorithm post and distribute content that is likely to go viral, drawing the attention of unsuspecting masses," says Raj Padhiyar, founder and CEO of Digital Gurukul. "Social media psychology suggests people respond more to content that evokes extreme emotions." Mohan, however, disagrees. "It's not good for us, not for people on the platform. There is no constituency that benefits from hate speech," he said in the interview to *TOI*.

As users' engagement increases, the platform has more time to serve ads customised to their online behaviour and personal data. This monopoly over personal details, thought process and political affiliation not only makes social media platforms a powerful tool for targeted communication but also helps them analyse and predict people's behaviour. Even publicly available data is being mined, as seen in a recent expose by *The Indian Express,* which claimed that a Chinese company, with links to the Chinese government and the Communist Party of China, had been monitoring the social media activities of influential individuals and organisations globally, including 10,000 from India. The activity was part of "hybrid warfare" to achieve dominance through "information pollution, perception management and propaganda".

Political parties exploit social media platforms because of their power to set the agenda based on the data derivatives they possess. Networks, on the other hand, seek out political parties as they bring in a large army of workers who can automatically enhance user base and engagement traffic, making the platforms attractive for advertisers.

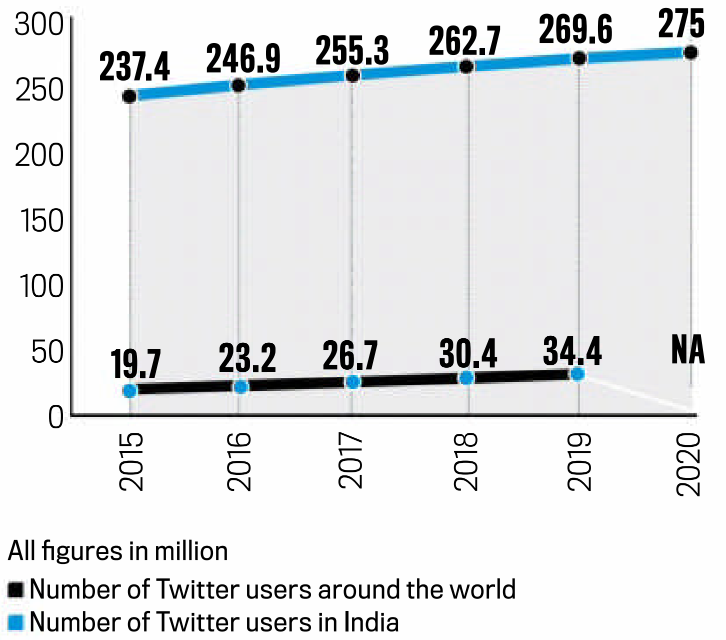
Through demographic and psychographic targeting on these platforms, political parties can bombard the electorate with messages, often without much accountability. The platforms help by creating echo chambers. They flood the timelines of people with content that reinforces their beliefs and cuts out contrarian views. "A vast majority of social media users have no idea they are not consuming content of their choice but what the algorithm of the platform has decided to serve, based on their online behaviour and profile," says Osama Manzar, founder-director of Digital Empowerment Foundation, New Delhi.

In India, the power and reach of social media has perhaps been tapped best by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Over the years, a well-crafted social media strategy has built an impregnable public image of the prime minister, which played a key role in his two consecutive Lok Sabha election victories. In the 2019 election, while the country was grappling with economic and job crises, a hyper-nationalistic social media narrative built around India's Balakot airstrike, in response to the Pulwama terror attack, helped Modi get an even bigger mandate than in 2014.

The power of social media to mould public opinion was evident again when Modi insulated himself from all criticism of his government's handling of the Covid pandemic. "We did an ethnographic study of 150,000 migrants from four states who had suffered due to the Covid lockdown. They complained about food shortage, their employers, police atrocities and state governments, but not one spoke against PM Modi or the

THE EXPANSION OF TWITTER

Launched in 2006, Twitter occupies only 7 per cent of the global social media space



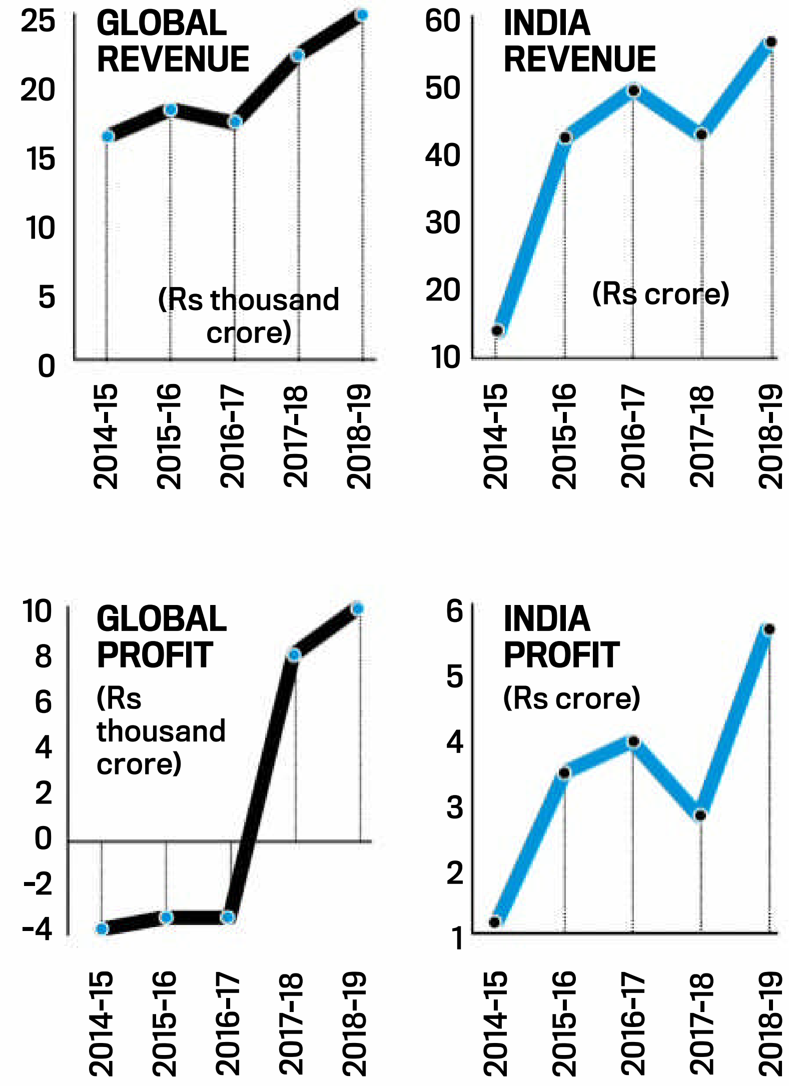
All figures in million

HOW TWITTER MAKES MONEY

Twitter generates revenue by selling promoted products, including tweets, accounts and trends to advertisers. The company creates tailored advertising opportunities by using an algorithm to make sure promoted products make it to the right users' timelines, 'Who to Follow' lists or the list of trending topics. Advertisers also have the option of paying for in-stream video ads delivered to a targeted audience or sponsoring video content from publishing partners. Twitter's data licensing business sells millions of tweets to various companies, which are looking to access, search and analyse historical and real-time data on the platform to decipher consumer trends. Other revenue sources include service fees that Twitter collects from users of its mobile ad exchange, MoPub.

TWITTER'S EARNINGS AND PROFITS

The microblogging service earns less than 2 per cent of its global revenue from India



central government," says Manzar.

Unfortunately, the biggest tool of the engagement-enhancing algorithm in social media engines has been abuse, particularly in the echo chambers where opposition is often blighted by falsehoods. It inflames social and communal tensions, creating an environment for the growth of far-right regimes across the world. "Social media is designed to facilitate an ephemeral engagement of 'click and forward' rather than a sustained and critical one. This type of communicative grammar—termed as epideictic rhetoric—facilitates groupthink, confirmation bias and echo chambers, which impede democratic will formation. It is no accident, therefore, that the age of social media has also seen the rise of authoritarian populism," say Anita Gurumurthy and Nandini Chami of IT for Change, a Bengaluru-based NGO.

A study by Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) researchers, examining about 126,000 stories shared by some 3 million people on Twitter between 2006 and 2017, suggests that fake news was about 70 per cent more likely to be retweeted than factual news. Though Twitter's allowance of bots has come under particular criticism, the MIT researchers found that these automated accounts accelerated true and fake news equally. A 2018 study in the journal *Natural Hazards* said less than 10 per cent of Twitter users questioned fake news. "Misinformation, fake news and conspiracy theories create a sense of aggressive arousal in the minds of consumers, diminishing their rational thinking," says eminent psychiatrist Dr Samir Parikh. "They get pulled into the false narrative, which gets amplified as they share such twisted information. Most factual information does not have that 'arousing' quotient and that's why it travels slowly on social media."

FAKE NEWS AS A POLITICAL TOOL

India's growing digital landscape has multiplied the spread of misinformation. The country's internet population grew 108 per cent, from 250 million in 2014, when the BJP came to power at the Centre, to 520 million in 2019. This April, Facebook announced it was spending $5.7 billion (around Rs 43,000 crore)—its biggest foreign investment yet—to pick up a 9.99 per cent stake in Reliance Jio, which has 388 million subscribers. With Jio rolling out cheap internet packs and smartphones in 2017, WhatsApp, which was bought by Facebook in 2014, emerged as the most powerful arsenal for creating a narrative. "Fake news became a weapon of mass conversion for political parties and the targets were people with low digital literacy and those prone to biases," says Pankaj Jain, founder of SM Hoax Slayer, a fact-checking digital platform.

As competition among political groups increased, the social media space became more vicious. New tricks were deployed—from buying bots to hiring social media influencers and digital marketing companies. Huge amounts are now spent on 'content armies', such as influencers and WhatsApp group administrators. In 2019, a study by Oxford researchers found that over a quarter of the content shared by the BJP and a fifth of that shared by the Congress was junk. A third of the BJP's and a quarter of the Congress's visual content on WhatsApp was catalogued as divisive and conspiratorial. "Just as popular will in a democracy shouldn't be distorted by using illegal means, democratic expression on social media shouldn't be interfered with using bots or other unethical means," Ram Madhav, the BJP's national general secretary, observes, sagely.

However, it's difficult to legally pin such activities on political parties as most of this is done through proxies. For instance, between February 2019 and September 5 this year, Rs 5,26,299, across 353 ads, has been spent on Facebook pages named after Rahul Gandhi. But not a single page is paid for by Rahul or the Congress. In the same period, a page called 'My First Vote for Modi' was the fourth biggest ad spender on Facebook—a whopping Rs 1.39 crore. O'Brien has demanded that surrogate campaigns run for the BJP be investigated. He claims Facebook favoured the BJP on the promise that the Modi government would allow its Free Basics and WhatsApp payments services in India.

While the BJP has been the front-runner in exploiting social media, its patronage of Facebook is not quite explicit yet. In 2016, Facebook's proposal to launch Free Basics—to provide a free, Facebook-centric internet service—was rejected by the government, albeit after some hue and cry from net neutrality activists. The WhatsApp payments service launch has also been pending for over two years.

> **"Greater transparency in spending by political parties on social media will allow users to differentiate between genuine content and propaganda"**
>
> **–SHASHI THAROOR**
> **Chairman, Parliamentary Standing Committee on IT**

> **"It is important to be diligent and sensible while formulating regulatory laws on digital media"**
>
> **–RAM MADHAV**
> **National General Secretary, BJP**

Besides, linkages between social media platforms and political parties are unlikely to be guided by ad revenue as political ads do not draw big money. In 2019, political ads accounted for just 0.5 per cent of the revenue for social media platforms. Between February 2019 and September 5 this year, political ads generated Rs 62 crore for Facebook—a meagre amount for a global giant. In the 2019 general election, Twitter earned just over Rs 10 lakh from the BJP and the Congress. The real binding force is the pull factor of the narrative spun by political parties—the traffic it brings to the platform. Rahul Jain, managing director of InnoServ Group, which owns digital marketing agency Social Rajneeti, says: "The claims of political bias among social media platforms are highly exaggerated. Irrespective of my clients' political affiliations, I have faced difficulty in getting our campaigns approved, but not because of any bias."

SOCIAL MEDIA AND SELF-POLICING

Social media platforms claim they have tried to curb hate-mongering and fake news by upgrading their community standards. Facebook claims 95 per cent of the content it removed in 2020 was auto-detected by the platform, up from

> **“What’s the point of demanding identity proof from a common citizen when people in power are misusing social media with impunity?”**
>
> **–DEREK O’BRIEN**
> **Parliament Party Leader in Rajya Sabha, Trinamool Congress**

> **“The BJP understood quite early how to bypass the traditional modes of communication and set a narrative using social media”**
>
> **–PRIYANKA CHATURVEDI**
> **Shiv Sena Deputy Leader in Rajya Sabha**

24 per cent in 2017. The latest Twitter Transparency report claims a 47 per cent jump in the number of accounts that have been acted against, as compared to the last reporting period. “Over time, the learning algorithms get better and we should have social media that has been able to self-police and remove hate campaigns and fake narratives. However, we do not see that happening with the large monopolistic social media giants,” says Jaijit Bhattacharya, president, Centre for Digital Economy Policy Research, New Delhi.

To avoid political bias, Twitter has decided to ban political ads altogether. “Elevating political debate and open discourse is fundamental to our core values. We banned political ads in 2019 as we believe that the reach of political messages should be earned, not bought,” a Twitter spokesperson told INDIA TODAY. But experts argue that political parties can still create “user generated content” through influencers and digital marketing agencies.

Most experts agree that attaching an identity proof to social media accounts will help reduce mischief. But there could be inherent dangers. “In some parts of the world, people’s lives would be at risk if they were not able to post anonymously—human rights defenders, dissidents, whistleblowers, journalists, artists. We focus on behaviours, and not just content, which means that regardless of whether or not you use your real name, you cannot circumvent our enforcement,” said the Twitter spokesperson.

Congress MP Shashi Tharoor, who is the chairman of the parliamentary standing committee on information technology, suggests a middle path. “People could use a pseudonym publicly, but the social medium knows who they are, so that any abuse can be pinned to an individual whose identity has been verified. This will also eliminate bots,” he says.

FIXING ACCOUNTABILITY

When faced with accountability issues, social media platforms argue that they are tech companies and not content creators. In India, social media and other Internet platforms (termed as ‘intermediaries’) are exempted from liabilities, thanks to Section 79 of the Information Technology Act, 2000. The authorities can act against users misusing a platform but not the platform itself. “The government must frame regulations to hold these platforms accountable. There should be a mechanism for reporting malicious content and immediate action,” says Rohan Gupta, social media head of the Congress. Prasad has asked Facebook to put in place country-specific ‘community guidelines’ that show respect for India’s social, religious, cultural and linguistic diversity.

Following a spate of lynching incidents in 2018, the ministry of electronics and IT had proposed amendments to the rules for information and messaging platforms. Among other things, it asked ‘intermediaries’ to give access to the origin of a message within 72 hours of any government agency requesting so. WhatsApp declined, citing invasion of privacy. Its encryption system makes conversations impenetrable to the company itself. Though this has made the platform vulnerable to misuse, the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) has advised against bringing communication platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, Apple FaceTime, Google Chat, Skype and Telegram under any regulatory regime. TRAI feels making interception mandatory would weaken the protective architecture of the communication apps or expose them to “unlawful actors”.

Experts strike a note of caution on the IT Intermediaries Guidelines (Amendment) Rules, 2018. “The proposed amendments to the Intermediaries Guidelines Rules create more problems than they solve as they will only enable government-influenced censorship without any check on power grab by the platform oligopolies,” says Mishi Choudhary, legal director, Software Freedom Law Center, New York.

More than legislation, the need is for a comprehensive social media policy. “Regulation can help, but in a country where legal remedies take time, social media giants must realise that the onus is on them to track down such instances and crack down in real time,” says Tharoor. Pratik Sinha of Alt News, a fact-checking portal, expects no positive change till the time social media giants change their business models. “In the current business model, the algorithms on these platforms will always favour sensationalist content,” says Sinha. Perhaps, as Manzar hopes, there will eventually be a course correction with a saturation point wherein people stop getting influenced by social media altogether. ■

–with Roshni Majumdar

Business Today

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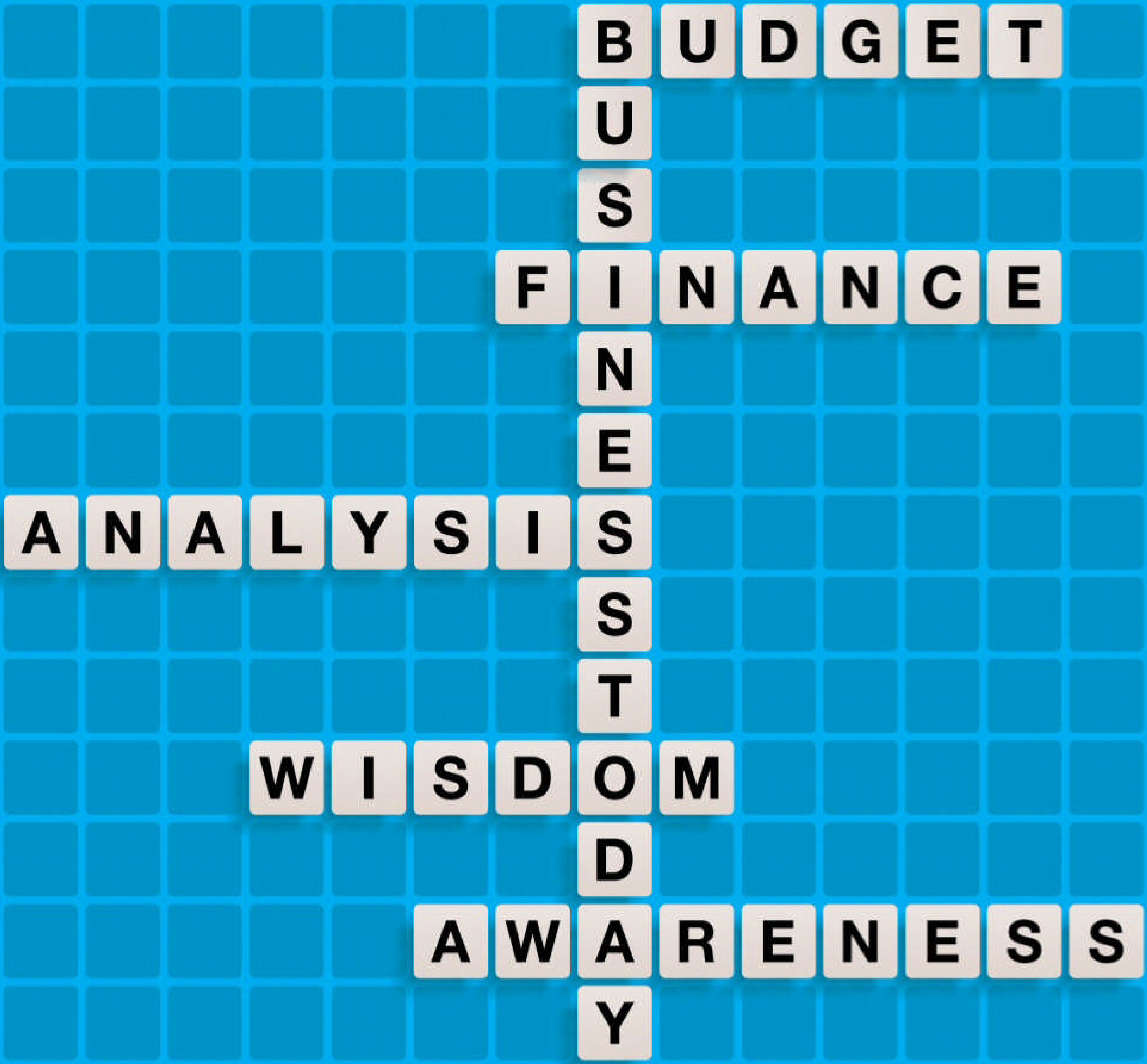
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LEISURE

IPL LINING UP FOR A WIN
PG 81

BRINGING HOME THE BACON
PG 83

DHASA DIARIES
PG 84

Q&A WITH KUBBRA SAIT
PG 86

SPORTS

STATE OF PLAY

THOUGH GAMES IN FRONT OF EMPTY STANDS MAKE LITTLE SENSE, THE ACTION CONTINUES UNABATED

Illustration by SIDDHANT JUMDE

Around the world, sport is back. The sight of dozens of fans beamed in on screens into largely empty arenas, cheering ecstatically for their teams or favourite players, has become a fixture of these denuded events, a grim simulation—like canned cheering—of the way things were. Still, cricket series have been played, the IPL, in all its boisterous, abrasive glory, is back at the weekend, the US Open tennis has just concluded while the US Open golf will begin on September 17, the NBA playoffs are ongoing, the NFL and English Premier League have begun new seasons, Formula 1 is back and badminton's Thomas and Uber Cup team tournament is scheduled to begin in Denmark in October.

Already, though, seven countries have withdrawn from the latter and Indian badminton star Saina Nehwal has tweeted, "Is it safe enough to conduct this tournament during this time", with two question marks appended for emphasis. The NBA is being held in a so-called bubble, in Disney World in Florida where the teams have been sealed off from the outside world and, early on, players posted pictures of their forlorn packed lunches, food not so much for professional athletes as travelling salesmen at a budget conference—all wilted cheese sandwiches, mouldy apples and bags of pita chips.

As TV viewers of sporting events, the action can seem to lack both punctuation and rhythm

Players in New York at the US Open tennis tournament were criticised for complaining about the onerous conditions in which they were forced to isolate themselves, particularly after Frenchman Benoit Paire tested positive for the coronavirus just before the grand slam tournament began. His compatriot Kristina Mladenovic, who was 6-1, 5-1 up before she lost in three sets in the second round, was scathing about the prison-like conditions in which the players were being held. Former world number one and US Open champion Andy Roddick said she needed a lesson in perspective. But Mladenovic's frustration, if not her analogy, was understandable. Half of the top-ranked women's doubles team in the world, she was forced to withdraw from the doubles tournament because of her contact with Paire. Even worse, Paire who had tested positive, later tested negative for the virus in a follow-up test. "If I had known," Mladenovic said, "that playing cards for 40 minutes with a mask... would have these consequences, I would never have set foot in this tournament."

Many players did not, including world number one women's player Ashleigh Barty, who is also skipping the French Open, which begins on September 21, and defending men's champion Rafael Nadal who could have equalled his great rival Roger Federer's record total of grand slam singles titles with a win in New York. Nadal will begin as favourite to do just this at Roland Garros, where he has won 12 times, including the last three in a row. Federer, recovering from knee surgery, will only return to court next year. But the US Open ended well, with Naomi Osaka, who wore a face mask emblazoned with the name of a different Black victim of US police brutality for each of her seven matches, beating Victoria Azarenka in the women's final, and Dominic Thiem coming back from two sets down to beat Alexander Zverev in five in the men's event. Thiem, who had lost three previous finals, including the Australian Open final this year, is tipped to be the next great men's champion, though it appears as if the men's tour, led by the sometimes petulant Djokovic, is headed for a relatively fallow period as Nadal and especially Federer slow down. With a variety of skilled, charismatic players at the top of the game, women's tennis is more fun to follow right now, as Serena Williams still chases the elusive slam that will draw her level with Margaret Court, though most fair-minded observers will acknowledge that she has already surpassed the Aussie whose 11 Australian Opens, when it was the weakest of the Slams, inflate her total.

So what of the panoply of sporting performance being broadcast on our screens? Certainly, the quality and drama does not seem dimmed by the loss of the crowd. But, for the TV viewer, as we now all are, the action can seem to lack both punctuation and rhythm, deprived as we are of the proper acknowledgement by the crowd—via gasp, delirium and prolonged buzz for instance—of astounding athleticism at a crucial moment. In any case, can a government jobsworth tell us why we can't hold matches in partially-filled outdoor stadiums with fans appropriately distanced and masked?

Games in front of empty stands make little sense. Even commercial logic militates against the exercise, as evidenced by reduced TV contracts and lower-level professional clubs facing extinction. The action, as we now know, continues unabated. Without the people, though, the poetry is lost, the intensity of feeling that gives the action its meaning, that makes it something more than just a dull exhibition of alienating superiority. ■

–Shougat Dasgupta

LINING UP FOR A WIN

SPORTS

LOW ON POMP THIS YEAR, THE IPL STILL PROMISES SOME GREAT CRICKET ENTERTAINMENT

(from left) Krunal Pandya; Shikhar Dhawan; Delhi Capitals coach Ricky Ponting; and (top) Virat Kohli during net practice ahead of the IPL

The last time the Indian Premier League (IPL) was played in Dubai in 2014, the Kolkata Knight Riders (KKR) were crowned champions. Robin Uthappa top-scored the tournament with 660 runs, while Mohit Sharma bagged the most wickets at 23. Since then, KKR has failed to make the final again. Last season, Uthappa managed just 282 runs with KKR and has since found new employers in Rajasthan Royals (RR). And after just one appearance with the Chennai Super Kings (CSK) in 2019, Sharma is now with the Delhi Capitals (DC).

Clearly, a lot can happen over six years. After what seems like endless delays due to the pandemic, most players will be looking to shake the dust off. Besides, they'll have to get used to playing for empty stadiums, without the razzmatazz that the IPL is all about.

As defending champions and the most successful franchise, Mumbai Indians (MI) will be the team to beat. It was Rohit Sharma yet again who led them to their fourth triumph. However, this time around, he will be without the services of his super trump, Lasith Malinga, and will, instead, be relying on Jasprit Bumrah and new boy Trent Boult to deliver.

The opening fixture on September 19 promises to be a cracker, a repeat of last year's final where the MI edged CSK out by just one run. While the preparations of the runners-up have undoubtedly been hampered after 13 team members tested positive for Covid, and seasoned campaigners Suresh Raina and Harbhajan Singh opted out of the tournament, all eyes are on skipper M.S. Dhoni, especially after his retirement from international cricket last month. He has on hand Imran Tahir, who took 15 wickets in the recently concluded Caribbean Premier League. The bowling department looks plush, but with an average age of 36.8, the experience of their top-five batters may flatter to deceive.

The only side that have failed to make a final, DC look a formidable side, packed with core Indian players—from the young blood of Shreyas Iyer, Prithvi Shaw and Rishabh Pant, to the wisdom of Shikhar Dhawan, new recruit Ajinkya Rahane, Ishant Sharma and Amit Mishra.

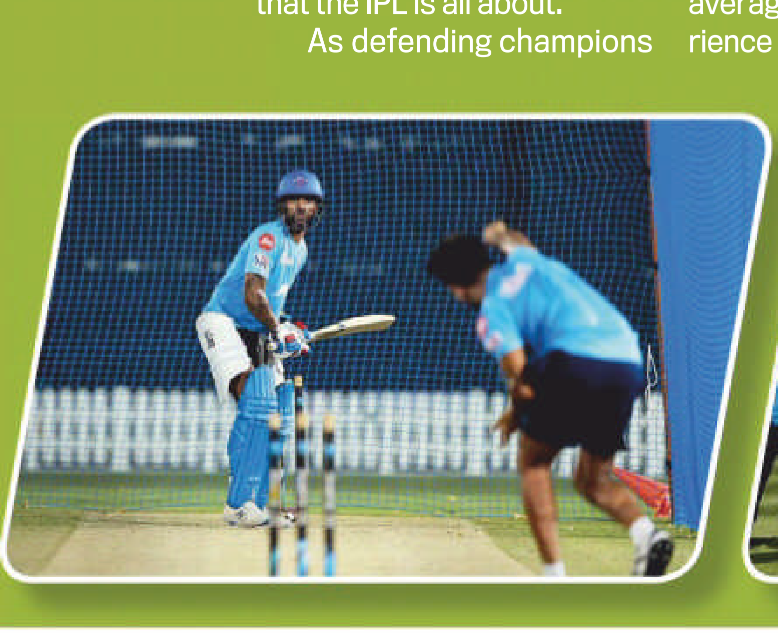
Hiring two-time IPL-winning coach Trevor Bayliss will likely be the key for Sunrisers Hyderabad, with a batting line-up made up of last season's top scorer David Warner, Kane Williamson and Jonny Bairstow. While RR too have some robust options in Steve Smith, Jos Buttler and new player David Miller, they'll need the Indian contingent to step up to make a mark.

Perhaps the biggest gamblers this season are the KKR, who have offloaded star performers such as Uthappa, Piyush Chawla and Chris Lynn, reinforcing their stables with pacer Pat Cummins—the most expensive foreigner in IPL's history—and Eoin Morgan, and now look a well-rounded unit.

No discussion on the IPL would be complete without the Royal Challengers Bangalore and Virat Kohli, the highest run-getter of the tournament, who leads a side that has made the most finals without winning it. Besides the addition of Adam Zampa and Chris Morris, they'll be relying on their core from last year.

Finally, the last time Kings XI Punjab made the playoffs was also way back in 2014. Given the strange times we are living in, is this the year when it all falls in place for K.L. Rahul and his boys yet again? ■

–Shail Desai



Photographs by ANI

FOOD

Missing an Ingredient

***Those Delicious Letters* is a light, frothy read that falls short of being something more**

THOSE DELICIOUS LETTERS
by Sandeepa Mukherjee Datta
HARPERCOLLINS
₹299; 296 pages

Sandeepa Mukherjee Datta's second book, *Those Delicious Letters*, revolves around food, just like her first, *Bong Mom's Cookbook*, but this time around the popular blogger and writer has experimented with fiction.

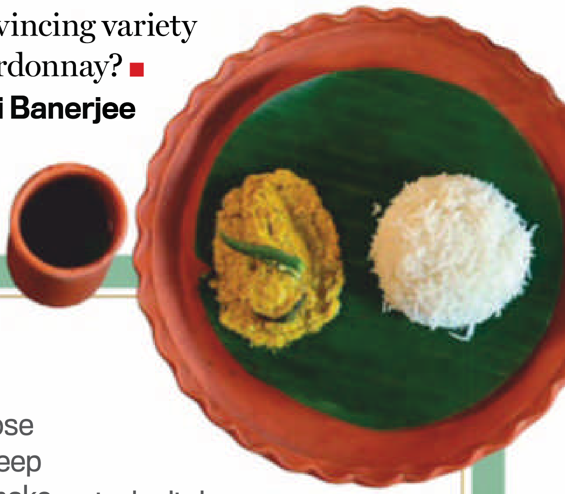
The protagonist Shubhalaxmi Sen-Gupta introduces herself with her hyphenated surname, explaining, "as in, I was sane before marriage". The book begins with her 40th birthday and follows her while she has something of a midlife crisis. At her surprise party, while listening to her frenemies brag about their humanitarian aid trips, the marathons they have run, the instruments they have learned to play, dream jobs and "learning to cook at least five things your mother made", she spirals down memory lane.

We learn that Shubha gave up a career in architecture to look after her two daughters and now that they are 15 and 12, she feels like her life has been spent "packing lunchboxes, snipping coriander, sitting outside Piyu's ballet lessons and waiting in parking lots for Riya's swimming lessons". But being a "Bong mom", in her case, did not mean churning out Bengali recipes for her family. Traditional Bengali meals were more her busy husband Sameer's area. She was the type to have taco nights for the kids or bake a salmon fillet in the oven. Having lost her mother at a young age, Shubha never learnt how to cook Bengali food and confesses that initially it felt "too painful to attempt". Now that the pain of having lost her mother has dulled, she is intimidated by the idea of cooking those dishes.

It is around this time that mysterious letters from a woman claiming to be Shubha's grandmother are delivered to her office (she is 20 per cent partner at a fledgeling publishing firm). Each letter in this semi-epistolary is dedicated to a different month of the Bengali year, highlighting the recipes eaten during the season—*kochuri* for Jamaishasti celebrated in the summers, *khichuri* and *bhapa Ilish* that spells monsoon for all Bengalis, and the Saraswati Puja special *gota Sheddho*, among others. The book is a breezy read and the grandmother's nostalgic ramblings provide a compelling romantic backstory.

But *Those Delicious Letters* also has its flaws. How does a middle-class Bengali grandmother who was in college during the Swadeshi movement know about cooking hilsa in the oven? The book also suffers from a lack of exploration of the distant relationship between Shubha and Sameer. The supporting characters, too, seem unidimensional. Even her angst at losing her mother and the solace she finds in these recipes decades later feels like more tell, less show. As a reader, it is hard to relate to Shubha. Plus, to nit-pick a little more, while "liberally pouring 1960s' wines", could she not have chosen a more convincing variety than Chardonnay? ■

–Malini Banerjee



TRIALS & ERRORS

Two recipes from Sandeepa Mukherjee Datta's novel

HING'R KOCHURI

It was the passing mention of Putiram's lentilstuffed *kachori* that did it. The shop at Surya Sen Street in Kolkata has fed students (myself included) for over 160 years. Moved by nostalgia, just like Shubha, I decide to try my hand at the *hing'r kochuri*. The results, though, were not appealing.

The book mentions soaking a cup of *urad dal* overnight. If you go with a standard US cup, it will result in a bland stuffing with not enough spice. The book could have, perhaps, given a disclaimer about the size of the cup, that it is not the same one used to measure flour. After blending it to a paste, one is supposed to dry it and cook it with a tempering of *hing* (asafoetida), ginger paste and fennel powder. The measurements mentioned by the recipe for these aromatics are too little to leave any lasting flavour.

For the dough, Datta recommends using equal portions all-purpose flour and whole wheat flour, which results in thick brown *kochuris*. Sadly, not reminiscent of anything I ate at College Street.

ILISH BHAPA

If you aren't among those Bengalis born with a deep knowledge of how to make *ilish* or *chingri bhapa*, this method will be great for you. It also offers an easy alternative to steaming in a tiffin container.

The recipe is fairly standard, using mustard and poppy seeds, turmeric, chillis, coconut, yoghurt and mustard oil. What makes hers different is the little drizzle of *kashundi*. "Living far from home, my cooking has a few unorthodox twists. Any little shortcut that helps me cook dinner at the end of a busy day is incorporated," says Sandeepa Mukherjee Datta. This one is a winner on all those counts. ■

–Malini Banerjee

SUBIR HALDER

BRINGING HOME THE BACON

India is seeing the emergence of an enthusiastic culture around pork

Being married to a pork lover isn't a thing to be taken lightly. Once, at a party, a large ham made a brief appearance before the guests prior to being whisked into the dining room. My husband spent the rest of the cocktail hour lurking in the doorway, making eyes at its scored and clove-studded curves. I'm fairly certain our relationship turned serious the night I roasted a pork belly for dinner.

Sacks of frozen meatballs sent to friends, stockpots full of trotters and bones, packets of oily choriz and smoked meat smuggled in suitcases from Goa and Meghalaya, respectively—pork has its own gravity in the constellation of our social relationships.

Despite the swine's entrenched associations with the gutter, we're not alone. Consumption of pork is up. Online and offline clubs include Porkaholics on Facebook, Bengaluru's Pork Lovers Club, and Kolkata Porkaddicts, among others. While, historically, India's pork-eating communities have sourced from small-scale unregulated producers, and our English breakfast-eating elite consumed imported meat, the past decade has seen the rise of farmers, producers and buyers who are pushing the market towards greater standardisation and quality control. And, fuelled by shows like this year's *Chef's Table: BBQ*, tastes are moving beyond bland frankfurters and anodyne bacon.

While, on the one hand, larger producers are emulating international-standard preserved meats, on the other, there is a tribe of professional chefs and home cooks curing, smoking and delivering pork. "The number of pork shops in Bangalore has gone up threefold," estimated Jacob John, who sells small batches of bacon and other preparations under the Instagram handle 'East of Bangalore'. Over the past two years, John has gone from a cardboard smoker to a brick one. Through the pandemic and lockdown in Bengaluru, chefs like Gautam Krishankutty (Gonzo Garbanzo) and Karishma Sharma (The Tenth Muse) have pivoted towards small-batch delivery, powered by social media, along with Coorg recipe specialist Curly Sue.

Similarly, there is the H Man BBQ in Delhi, converted from a tiny dining counter to a pork-forward delivery kitchen, selling raw, cured and cooked meats. Sambaran Mitra, a chef and consultant in Gurgaon, started his service Meathead "on a lark" over two months ago because other work had stalled and "[his] smoker was just lying there". He now smokes 20-plus kilos of pork every two or three days, using rubs and marinades from around the world.

In Mumbai, there's Goan sausage company Pedro Pão and Joshua Pereira, who customises bikes and smokes hog at Incendiary Motorcycles and Incendiary Kitchen. Mumbai's Kaavo and Gurgaon's Smoke Freaks both offer small-batch hunks of meat, but through slicker websites and not just social media or word-of-mouth. In Kolkata, pop-ups like Pig Boss and charcuteries with strong online communities, The Whole Hog and Calcutta Deli, have replaced the legendary Kalman Cold Storage, which according to some reports shut shop early this year due to lack of new workers willing to handle both beef and pork. With intolerance now the bitter spice of life in India, as Artisan Meats co-founder Meherwan Bawa points out, "Pork is the new beef."

Artisan, with the tagline "Eat Clean Meat" is among the crop of quality- and hygiene-obsessed charcutiers, some of whom have scaled up to delivery through online portals or retail counters around the country. When your USP is ultra-hygienic meat, it's not hard to extend this marketing to suit pandemic conditions. Primo Foods (Lion-Fresh.com) and Prasuma (selling via Meatigo) are two such purveyors. Lately, Japanese Standard Processing, a company related to the Japanese chain Kuuraku, is advertising its pristine, baby pink "Japanese Clean Room Technology" pork on Instagram.

These brands have adjusted to pandemic conditions with the whole-hog attitude. When Bengaluru's Arthur Foods had to stall plans to open a Delhi counter for its German-standard, Indian-produced Meisterwurst brand, its representative in the capital, Harathi Reddy Rebello, decided to just convert her basement to a cold storage and start delivering from home. "I would say, 80 per cent of the people I speak to, like me, didn't eat pork in India," says Rebello. "And I have a nice long extended conversation with each of them." ■

—Sonal Shah

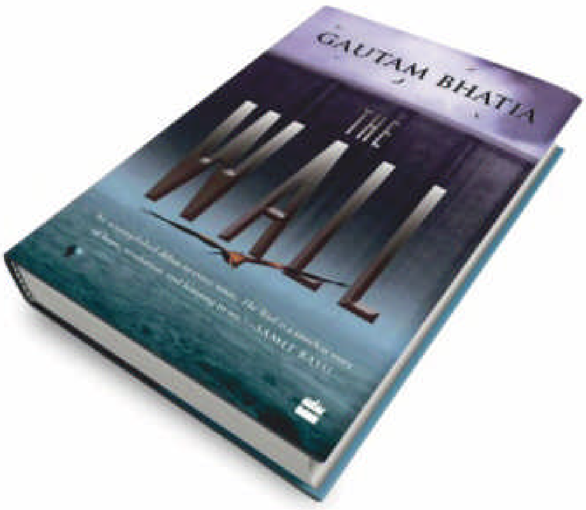
(clockwise from top) Debrecen sausages by Smoke Freaks; German black forest ham by Meisterwurst; peri peri smoked chicken sausage by Artisan Meats; Jacob John of East of Bangalore and (right) his brand's belly bacon

SUJATA KHANNA

BOOKS

LOCKED IN

AN ELOQUENT LAWYER TURNS TO SPECULATIVE FICTION SET IN A STRANGELY FAMILIAR DYSTOPIA



THE WALL
by Gautam Bhatia
HARPERCOLLINS
₹**399; 418** pages

Gautam Bhatia's debut novel, *The Wall*, a science fictional tale, is set in the mysterious city of Sumer. In it, the characters talk of experiencing "*smara*", described as the unbearable yearning for freedom that citizens feel when they gaze upon the immense circular Wall that imprisons them.

The story begins with a handful of rebels fleeing from oppressors, called Shoortans. But there's no question of escape. Sumer's impenetrable containment was created by a race of god-like beings called The Builders. Just as the wall is unbreachable, so are the physical, social and administrative structures of Sumer set in place by the Builders. Nevertheless, the citizenry, not so oppressed that they can't resist oppression, chafe against the restrictions.

Unfortunately, the title of the book is not only a spoiler, but a barrier of its own. Merely to see it is to guess that the story must revolve around who will or won't break out. Since the point of view is limited to residents of Sumer, we cannot know what lies beyond. It could have been poignant, but is instead merely frustrating. It's our world in miniature, shrunk to the size of a single city, constrained by rock-hard strictures. There are metaphors lurking behind every pillar, flavours from different cultures and eras. Main characters such as Mithila, her sister Minakshi and male buddy Alvar are likeable but too busy advancing the plot to engage our attention as people.

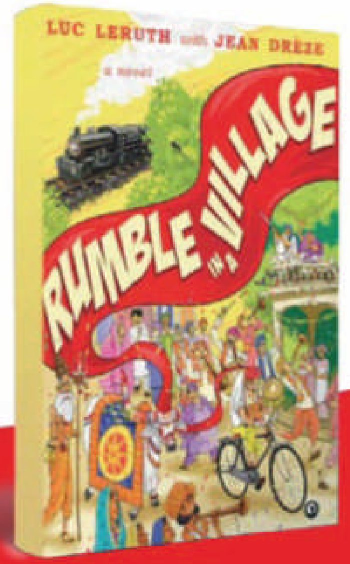
The most authentic quality of the book is the way it reproduces the wretchedness of being crushed and trapped within a vicious, god-fearing, ritual-obsessed culture. No surprise if it sounds frighteningly familiar. ■

–Manjula Padmanabhan

BOOKS

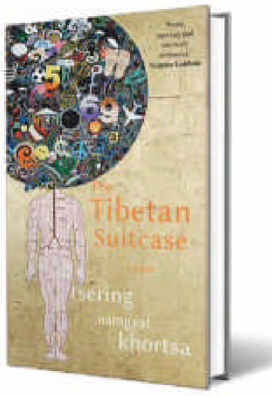
Dhasa Diaries

A BILDUNGSROMAN OF DHARAMSALA AND THE WIDER TIBETAN DIASPORA



RUMBLE IN A VILLAGE
by Luc Leruth
with Jean Dreze
ALEPH
₹**500; 308** pages

ALAMY



THE TIBETAN SUITCASE
by Tsering Namgyal Khortsa
BLACKNECK BOOKS
₹**300; 248** pages

Tashi Dawa, the protagonist of *The Tibetan Suitcase* at one point asks, "What have we inherited from our parents and forefathers?" and answers his own question: "Nothing but trauma, sadness and loss, all wrapped in a beautiful language." Given the tribulations of the past 60 years and the pressures and uncertainties of being a culture separated from its land, it is surprising that there is relatively little contemporary Tibetan literature to make sense of it all.

As if in recognition of this, the novel by Tsering Namgyal Khortsa has Dawa leaving Dharamsala for the US to join a creative writing programme early on in the narrative. There he finds not only love, but also Khenchen Sangpo, a lama, a leading Tibetan scholar and, eventually, his mentor. It's hard to miss the difference between the two men: Sangpo, born in Tibet and immersed in and almost embodying its culture, is whole in a way that Dawa, born in exile in India, and somewhat listlessly grappling with the uncertainties of his situation, is not. At least, not until he finds his way.

The novel's setting flits across the globe—to Sarnath, Hong Kong, the US, Oxford, southern France, Tibet. Of all, perhaps the most vividly described and the one stable centre of the novel is Dharamsala—Dawa calls it "this borrowed but beautiful homeland of mine". In a wryly impressionistic portrait of a McLeodganj cafe, Dawa sees foreign tourists, armed with their *Lonely Planets* and 'Free Tibet' bags, who have come "to savour the remnants of a culture quickly being globalised". He notices a pony-tailed Tibetan man "kissing a rather leggy European" amid talk of sponsoring a visa, and a Tibetan monk "putting together proposals for a brand new Buddhist monastery in India".

The novel uses something of an epistolary format. The narrative unfolds through letters, articles, news reports and diary entries. This telling of a story through fragments feels particularly appropriate for the lives being written about. It is also a naturally quick-moving format, with breaks in the narrative providing momentum, and Khortsa pulls it off skillfully. His writing can, at times, feel a little stiff, unable to fully inhabit the variety of voices the book holds, but he can also be very funny at times—like with Dawa's earnest advice to his American researcher girlfriend to avoid Tibetan men, "especially the dissident poets", or in his description of communism as "Tibetan Tantric Buddhism gone wrong".

The life of Tibetans in exile is torn between the need to preserve a collective past and shape individual futures. The sort of situation where it is useful to have cultural resources that allow perspective and reflection. Here, *The Tibetan Suitcase* steps up gently, unassumingly. ■

—Srinath Perur

The book follows its protagonist **TASHI DAWA** as he grapples with the uncertainties of his situation and, eventually, finds his way

An Outsider's Voice

On the matter of rural India, Jean Dreze enjoys a unique intellectual and moral authority. Equipped with the finest academic training, he has demonstrated a durable existential commitment by actually living among the destitute and the landless about whom so many conscientious others are content to merely write about, from a distance. As such, *Rumble in a Village*, co-authored by Luc Leruth "with" Jean Dreze, commands attention.

In a preface, Dreze explains that the origins of this novel lie in the field notes he accumulated as a young post-doc, in a village called Palanpur, in Uttar Pradesh's Moradabad district back in 1983-84. The "field notes" have been equipped with a thin fictional device—it is 1984 and a London-based banker, Anil, is persuaded to return to his ancestral village, Palanpur, because an uncle has been murdered, his English girlfriend Pat has academic ambitions about researching among rural women in India, and because Anil is an amateur photographer who plans to use the visit to build a portfolio. So far, so contrived. Naturally, Anil makes "notes" during the course of his visit. And, by a happy coincidence, his father too had made detailed notes about the historical background of Palanpur! The "novel" essentially splices together these two sets of "notes". So one ends up knowing a lot about Palanpur past and present, but it doesn't add up to a novel, alas.

I have been trying to figure out why this is so. Dreze is the consummate insider, uniquely entitled to tell the nominally Anglophone urban Indian about these rural realities. And yet, the novel chooses to adopt the narrative voice of an NRI outsider. The effect is both curious, and stale—as if India is being observed for a foreign audience, with that air of distant, patronising amusement which one knows from NRI narratives.

Dreze is the consummate insider, uniquely entitled to tell the nominally Anglophone urban Indian about these rural realities

The manner of dealing with sex is deliciously coy. I can't make out whether this is a concession to the sensitivities of allegedly prudish Indian readers or a new, post-lib trend. Here's an example: "She was obviously happy with me and demonstrated it to our mutual satisfaction. I have been thoroughly well educated in matters related to such satisfaction and I would never turn my back and go off to sleep although I did not mind Pat doing so."

Such delights add a whole new level of interest to the field notes of social scientists. ■

—Alok Rai

Q+A

A JUDGEMENT-FREE ZONE

Kubbra Sait on speaking up in support of Rhea Chakraborty and on filming her Amazon Prime web series *Wakaalat from Home*, from home

Q. You have been vocal about the media trial that Rhea Chakraborty has faced...
I was looking at it from a place of sensitivity. This is not justice. I also realised I can't do anything beyond saying what I feel. I didn't think I'd be trolled and abused so much. My family is concerned and my brother is telling me to be an artist, not an activist.

Q. You are also a storyteller. How has it shaped the artist you are today?
All my stories are autobiographical. I was taught early on by Roshan Abbas to never tell a story if you aren't over it. The idea is not to move yourself, but to move the audience. The greatest trait of an actor is to be non-judgemental. If I walk in with a bias, I won't be able to do justice to a character.

Q. You have also spoken up about mental health.
This is not an epidemic limited to a particular industry. I had no idea about my brother's mental anguish until he told us about it. I wondered what led him to it? Instead of discussing if 'Sushant's death was a murder or suicide?', we need to ask our loved ones, 'How are you?' And wait to hear how they feel.

Q. What was it like shooting for *Wakaalat from Home* remotely?
As an actor, one depends on sensory cues. This was an interesting masterclass because we were not disconnecting from our homes. I was wearing Kubbra's clothes and was in her house while playing this part. It wasn't easy, but the process was evolved and very therapeutic.

—with Suhani Singh

PLAN TO SUPPORT YOUR CHILD'S ASPIRATIONS

As parents, one thing that you would want for your child is for him/her to get the best of everything in life. The environment that kids are exposed to today is drastically different to what you experienced in your childhood. While there are many more opportunities for kids these days, the world is also getting that much more competitive and fiercer, be it in education or sports. That's why you would want holistic development for your child so that he/she is prepared for every future challenge.

Traditionally, you as a parent would only end up planning for your child's education. Given the kind of exposure that children get today, they are likely to explore unconventional career paths and aspire to become a coder, a gamer, an artist, an entrepreneur at a young age or make a career in sports. All these unconventional career paths do not yield immediate and regular income and thus need better financial planning at parents' end.

Today if your child wants to follow his / her passion of becoming a professional athlete or enter the creative field, it will require significant financial commitment on your end. The cost of the equipment and training required for these career paths can be significantly high and is over and above the normal education cost. Moreover, the education landscape has also drastically changed. Today, online learning has become a norm and gadgets such as a laptop, a tablet or smartphone has become a necessity. And this becomes an ongoing expense as technology soon becomes obsolete and needs upgrades. Hence, you as the new age parents need to factor in a lot more than just school and college fees for your child. In order to give wings to your child's aspirations, financial support is of utmost importance.

But are you prepared for it?

While its essential to let your child dream and pursue his/her passion, it is equally crucial for you to have an investment plan. Like for every other goal in your life, preparing an investment plan to meet the financial needs that may arise at different stages of your child's growth, can help avoid stress in future. For this it is essential that you start early and invest in appropriate investment avenues that have the potential for long-term wealth creation.

You may have planned for these expenses through traditional investment avenues but at the same time investments in market linked instruments such as mutual funds are also needed. That's not it, you should invest in your child's name so that you don't end up disturbing these savings in times of need and the money is only utilized for the intended purpose. Premature withdrawals from the fund allocated for your child can disturb the target corpus that you plan to achieve. Children's Funds offered by mutual funds are one avenue which can be looked at for long term wealth creation. These funds also have a lock-in period, say of 5 years, to discourage early withdrawals and to help you stay committed to the goal.

You should start investing at the earliest and in a systematic manner as it can help you build the required corpus by investing smaller amount on a regular basis. This is because the longer you stay invested, higher is the compound effect, eventually helping you build a higher corpus. In addition to staying invested for long-term, what can further accelerate the building of your target corpus is SIP Top-up. With rise in your income levels, the amount that you set aside for your child should also rise.

Children's Funds offer different plans which cater to different investor risk profiles. The decision to choose from either an equity-oriented fund or debt-oriented fund should be based on your risk profile, investment horizon and the corpus you intend to build. You can invest in these funds until the child turns 18. So, if you are starting early and have a longer investment horizon it is advisable to invest in a fund that has higher allocation to equities.

Rising inflation can adversely impact your investments plans. Therefore, investment in equities can act as a hedge against rising inflation by generating inflation adjusted returns. Historically, the education cost inflation has been higher than overall inflation. And now with education landscape rapidly changing, education cost is also expected to move up at a much higher pace. Thus, systematic and longer-term investments in equities can help in mitigating the adversities of rising inflation and also help beat short-term market volatility. It can also fulfil your dreams to be able to send your children to the best of schools, colleges, and foreign universities. So, applying what Swami Vivekanand said in the investment parlance "arise, awake and stop not your investments till your financial goal is reached". The need of the hour is to start investing now!

D. P. Singh, Chief Business Officer, SBI Mutual Fund

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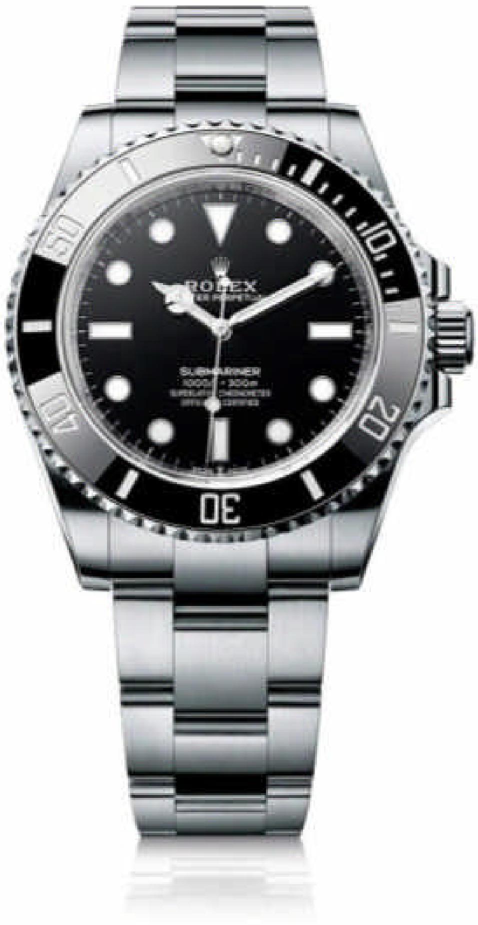

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SEPTEMBER 2020

HOME

HAPPY HEALTHY SPACES

HOW DESIGN IS CHANGING TO CREATE CHEERFUL AND SAFE HAVENS

Design studio Between Walls creates a cheery penthouse in Pune

IN CONVERSATION

WITH ARCHITECT NISHITA KAMDAR

TECH

WHY SMART HOMES HAVE BECOME A NECESSITY

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contents

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HOME

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6

THE NEW NORMAL

EXPERTS SPEAK
Industry insiders share how the design of our homes is changing in a post-COVID world

CHEERFUL SPACES
All you need to know to transform your interiors to exude a happy vibe

GIZMO GAGA
From refrigerators that help you with grocery to dressers that recommend makeup, smart homes are here to stay

Photograph courtesy ESSAJEES ATELIER; Photograph by TALIB CHITTAWALA

22

on trend

THIS & THAT
How to dress your space for the season

30

profile

THIS & THAT
Architect Nishita Kamdar shares her design journey

4 LAUNCHES

5 NEWS

COVER PHOTO BY: MAULIK PATEL, INCLINED STUDIO
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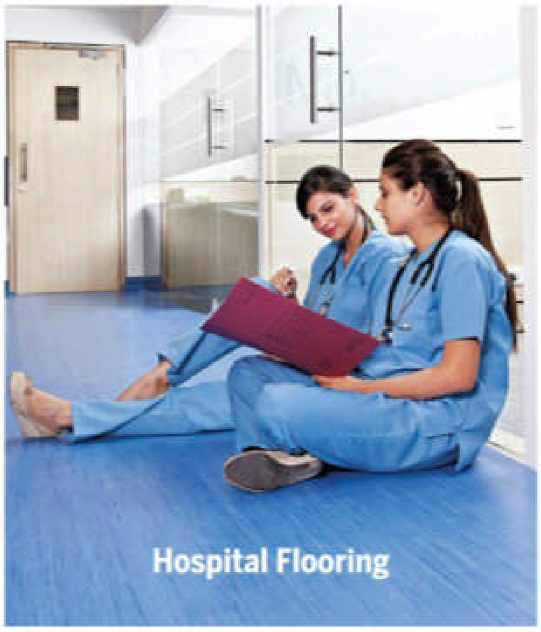
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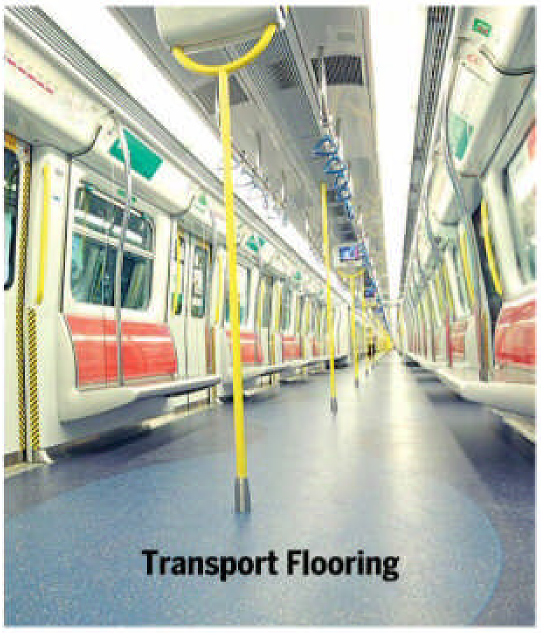
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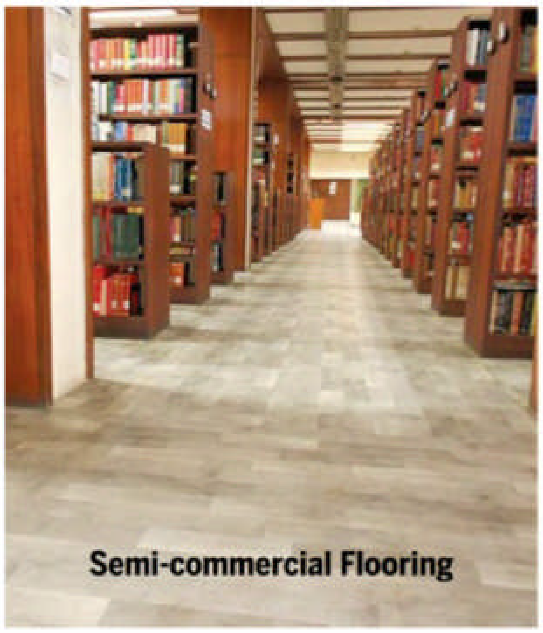
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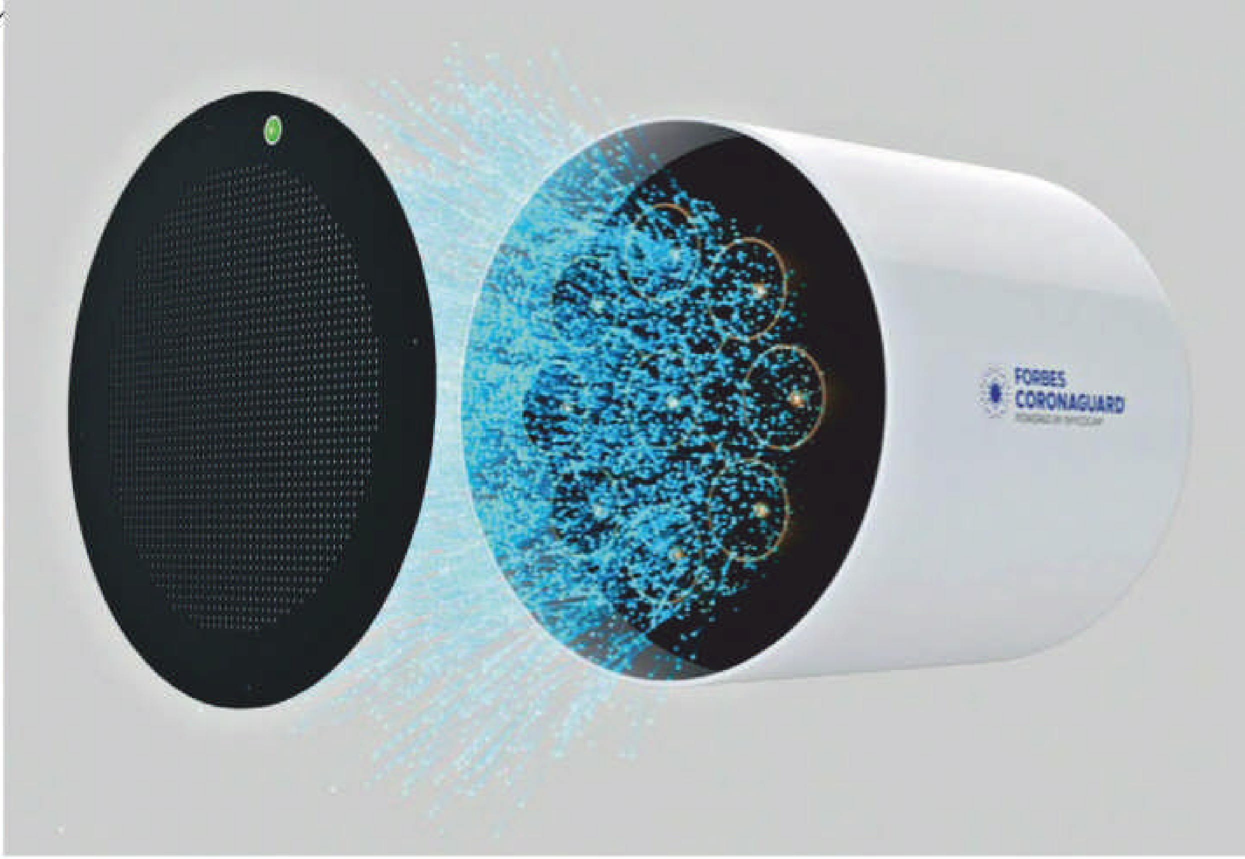
iSpy

Your guide to the hottest new stores and products

By RIDHI KALE



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Artist Yashesh Virkar is inspired by nature and his functional art brand, Yasanche is an expression of just that. His new product, the Drop Jewellery Tray, moulded in translucent resin using eight intricate, handcrafted techniques, is a part of the Water series.

PRICE ₹19,500
AT *www.yasanche.com*

Vocal for Local

Paro from Good Earth has launched a limited edition range of Bidri (a centuries old metal craft that uses an alloy of copper and zinc) objects. On display are the Bidri bowl, Pomegranate platter and the Brahmani Bull.

PRICE on request
AT *www.parogoodearth.com*

DO MORE OF WHAT MAKES YOU HAPPY

Photographs courtesy ASIAN PAINTS

Refurbish your Interiors

Let your walls do all the talking with the new Safe Painting Service

By RIDHI KALE

If the pandemic has taught us anything, it is that there is no place like home. From an office, school and play area to a restful, relaxing and entertainment zone—now our homes have to wear multiple hats. However, safety remains, the most important factor. With everyone's focus turning inwards to their homes, more and more people have expressed their desire to refurbish their living spaces. The question on everyone's minds is—how to do it safely? That's exactly where Asian Paints comes in. The brand has launched its Safe Painting Service, which prioritises health, safety and hygiene. Involving the usage of effective protective gear along with mechanised tools and Royal Health Shield paint to provide an added hygienic and protective shield to the walls.

So, what's the process like? An associate will inspect and visit your house, who will then suggest the products you could use and provide a rough estimate based on the products you choose and the surface area that needs to be painted. Once that is decided, trained applicators take care of the painting process, without compromising on safety. "Through Safe Painting Services we are removing that fear from people's minds as the painters and contractors who come to your house are trained by the company. They come with complete equipment and ensure all safety measures. They come with face masks, face shields, gloves and sanitiser and ensure you that the work they are doing is completely safe," says Amit Syngle, MD and CEO, Asian Paints Limited. Further, the painting site is sanitised at regular intervals and regular temperature checks are conducted to track the health of the painters. Post painting the team cleans up and sanitises your home.

That's not all, the painters use mechanised painting tools, telescopic roller, electric sanders, dust extraction through vacuum cleaners and conduct a scientific site evaluation through moisturemeters and laser-based digital distancemeters. The professionals also cover and mask furniture through masking films.

asianpaints
royale

LOOKING AHEAD

The world has changed, so has our home. To navigate this new normal, industry insiders and experts share their insights and ideas.

By **RIDHI KALE**

Photograph by PHOTOGRAPHIX

GOOD HOMES
The verandah of The Shift House by KDND Studio overlooking the Western Ghats and a man made lake (above); the garden side of the formal living in The Resort House by ADND Studio (left)

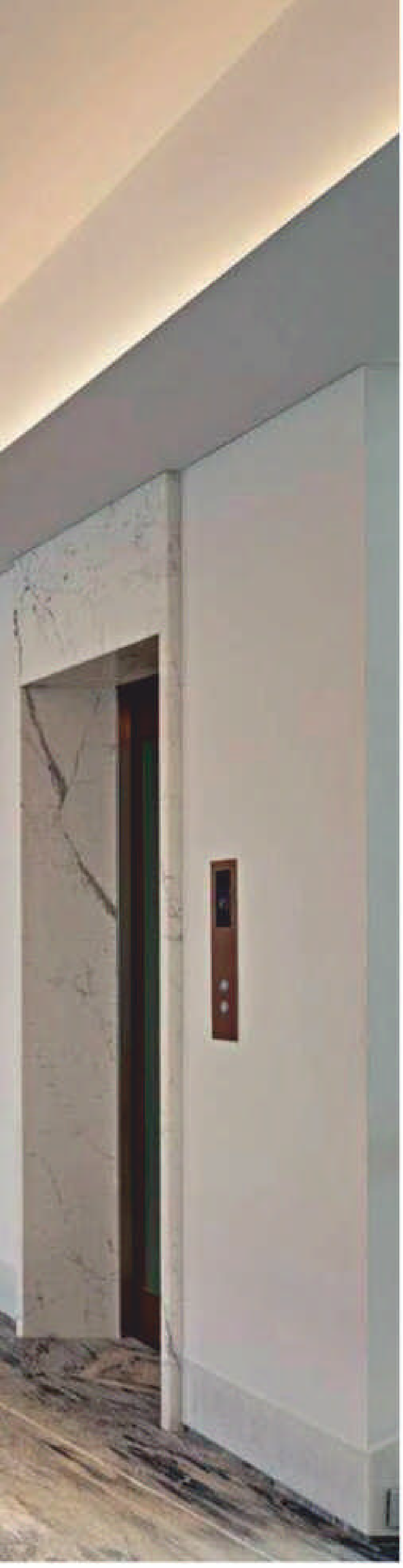
Photograph by PHOTOGRAPHIX

Human race is experiencing a black swan moment. The world as we experienced and recognised has changed. The outcome in the near and distant future will have many ramifications in both personal and work life. But this sudden pause to our momentum has brought on a sense of reflection and self-introspection. This hopefully will be a singular most positive takeaway from this pandemic. Designs will evolve from having "curb-appeal" to a more socially contributing device. Home grown compost from waste to manure your plants, design with less frills and show, home office to accommodate for a healthy home-work balance life, materials which are more sustainable and environmentally safe and most importantly less density per floor are some apparent observations that reflect the coming times. As designers we will need to build homes with fresh air circulation and natural light. The designs will need to cater to bring harmony with nature as much as possible.Technology and data are going to be the front runners in designing spaces of the future. AI homes is not a novel concept. This has already found a niche audience. However, the future will see it permeate into all homes. Homes will be the next bridge to achieve "wellness" and create oasis for a healthier safer and comfortable living.

SHOBHAN KOTHARI AND ANAND MENON
Founders and Principal Architects
ADND Studio and KDND Studio
www.adnd.in

KRUPA ZUBIN AND ZUBIN ZAINUDDIN
Founders
ZZArchitects
www.zzarchitects.net

Photograph by SEBASTIAN ZACHARIAH | PHOTOGRAPHIX

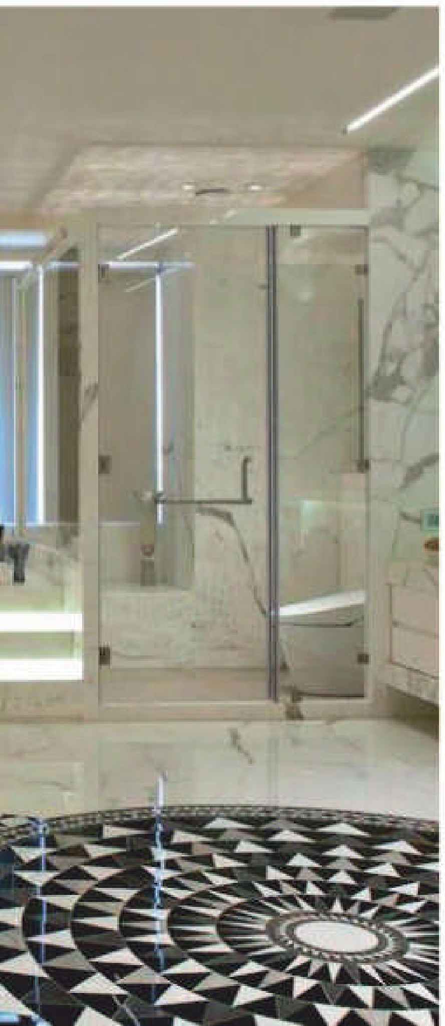


Photograph by SHAMANTH PATIL

ACE OF SPACE

(clockwise from left) Casual lounge in a Bangalore home; a spectacular deck in an apartment overlooking the Mumbai Sea Face; luxurious bathroom in a Mumbai villa

Photograph by SEBASTIAN ZACHARIAH | PHOTOGRAPHIX



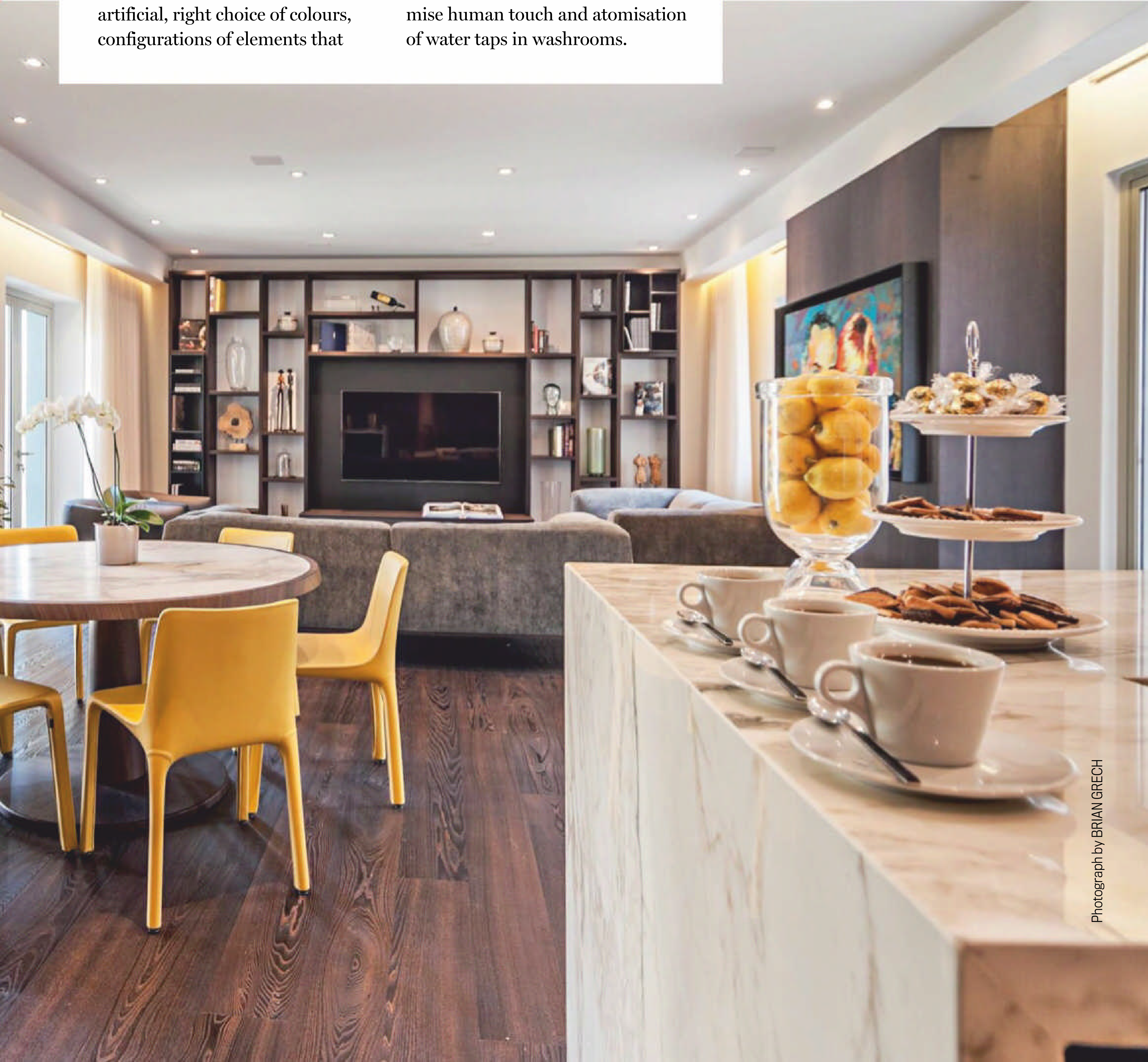
Homes have always been seen as a personal extension of the family that inhabits them. They were showcases to be shared with the friends and family and also to entertain socially. Suddenly it has also become the safe haven that one just wants to cocoon themselves within. Post COVID homes will definitely aspire to be much more. Irrespective of the size one has to play with, one needs to be pragmatic and at the same time also aspirational. These are few of the essentials that homes will need to really incorporate. The quality of natural light and air is what really will make a difference. Balconies and open spaces for apartments, gardens for larger homes, plants and greenery can be such joy and therapeutic relief. Gardens or a patch of green will become important factors in design. Technology and automation will also play a major role in the newer homes as these are not just gimmicks but can clearly contribute for a better way of living. Meditation rooms that add a sense of calm are needed in times which are troubling. Even *puja* rooms will definitely become larger to accommodate a few people to meditate. Media rooms are now seen as necessary havens within the home, these spaces need to be extremely well air conditioned, acoustically treated, emphasis on comfort is essential. Home office, library and study are now an extremely important part of the home. A home gym, a space for exercise with basic equipment would be in demand.A well-appointed kitchen with a stocked pantry and lots of storage space and refrigeration will be what people go for.

SMART DESIGN
(anti clockwise from left) Pool terrace for a duplex luxury apartment; open plan kitchen-living-dining for the same apartment; open plan space in a two-bedroom small home

Photograph by BRIAN GRECH

Staying indoors has emerged as the new way of living and we are beginning to realise the importance of the spaces we inhabit and its influence on our psychological wellbeing. With maturing 'smart' technology, we are heading into times of furthermore 'smart' abstractions. It's time for a 'smart design' now. An approach where we don't restrict ourselves into budgets as top priority and shift ourfocuses to addressing all exigencies of the current scenario. To tackle the drawbacks, we could start with taking careful consideration of the following—lighting, both natural and artificial, right choice of colours, configurations of elements that constitute that environment, scale and proportions of these elements with respect to each other and to the inhabitants, acoustics to help you focus better and impart your private spaces and spaces to share with all, ventilation of hot and cool air and the materials we choose to live in (such as budget-restricted cheap plastic chairs or varnish on wood responsible for the harmful emissions at home). For one of our on-going projects of a co-work space of around 10,000 sq ft in Mumbai, we suggested some revisions such as less crowding, using more sensor technology to minimise human touch and atomisation of water taps in washrooms.

KEITH PILLOW AND KIRTI DODEJA
Founder and Partner
DAAA Haus
www.daaahaus.com



Photograph by BRIAN GRECH

THE RIGHT VIBES

It's time to transform your interiors into a joyful and hopeful space. Don't know where to start? Our expert has you covered.

By **SARAH SHAM**

Photograph courtesy: GOKUL RAOKADAM; Styling: SAME WADEKAR

The world needs more restful spaces, and quarantine has shown us that. This may be the first time that the whole world has stopped in its tracks like this, but its taught us all how important it can be to make sure your home is really the most comfortable space for you and has to be calming in every way.

COLOUR CUES

While I do think some lighter colours are always easy on the eye, it's nice to switch it up with some fun wallpapers and patterns so that you aren't living in a boring white and beige space and you do have some kind of visual excitement going on. I think we undervalue the impact that a happy yellow wall can make or a beautiful patterned tile can have in uplifting a mood, so I would stay away from boring interiors and make sure homes are exciting,

HUE KNEW
A colourful dining room accented with a rug, an antique Chinese cabinet and custom brass furniture (left); a dramatic monochromatic bar area (below)

SUBTLE SOPHISTICATION
This home in Mumbai has a bright and sunny living space with a pop of pink (left); designer Sarah Sham (below)

Photograph by TALIB CHITTALWALA

Photograph by ABNER FERNANDES

bright and colourful.

LAYOUT IS IMPORTANT

One common mistake people make is placing furniture that is not sized correctly for the space. I've been to so many homes where there is a small living room with this massive armchair, or then conversely a large sprawling space with a small tiny sofa in it. It's really important to understand scale in a space and this will help the room feel bigger and more functional. I also think overcrowding a space is a problem, and in a setting like quarantine where we have used our homes to do everything from our morning yoga classes to evening family calls, there needs to be enough empty and open space left in the home for everyone to feel comfortable and accommodated.

DO IT YOURSELF

There's a lot that can be done at home. DIY gardening using kitchen waste and cut up vegetables, you can actually grow a kitchen garden right in your home. There is plenty of information online, available on this topic. You can also upcycle hardly used furniture and make it into something more functional. apart from this, you can also do a lot of DIY art with your family which is a great bonding experience for all.

TIME FOR A NEW LOOK

Post lockdown it's time to really have some fun with your homes. Splurge on new wall paint, wallpapers, fun and colourful rugs and some nice throw cushions and accessories to spruce up your space and make it feel fresh, after all you must have looked at your home looking the same for all these weeks and your home deserves some upgrading as well.

AMRITA GUPTA
Director, Manglam Builders

ELEGANCE UNMATCHED

Design comes naturally to Interior Designer Amrita Gupta. A true visionary, the multi-faceted designer thrives in making an impression that lasts

AMRITA GUPTA, DIRECTOR, MANGLAM BUILDERS

A woman of substance, Amrita Gupta is known for setting trends. From being one of the most sought-after interior designer in Jaipur to a strong visionary of promoting women leadership - she skilfully manifests diverse pursuits. A feisty mother of three, her sense of aesthetics and family roots in the industry helped her as an interior designer. Following her passion, she earned her Master's in Interior Designing from SCAD, Atlanta, USA and her eye for detail can be seen in all her projects. A force to reckon with today, as a Director of Manglam Builders, her work covers numerous projects ranging from residential apartments, clubhouses, villas and corporate offices. Classy, stylish and sustainable, her designs are as exquisite as her! Of many accolades to cherish, recently she has been honoured as the 'Most Dynamic and Innovative woman entrepreneur from Rajasthan by the International Glory Awards, 2019.

DESIGN PHILOSOPHY

Nature is the first impulse to initiate design. My phenomenological design theory depends on both inner and outer perceptions. The idea is to unearth the unusual and make primitive contacts with the world while enhancing the sense of the space with longevity and prolonged happiness. Also, as a designer, my approach is mainly biophilic and to maximize green communities with paramount natural ventilation.

INSPIRATION

Adhering to the philosophy of organic architecture - designing in harmony with humanity and its environment, I am in constant awe with the structures designed by Frank Lloyd Wright. I am also fascinated with the designs of Eileen Gray, a pioneer of the Modern Movement in architecture and a furniture designer.

FAVOURITE PROJECT

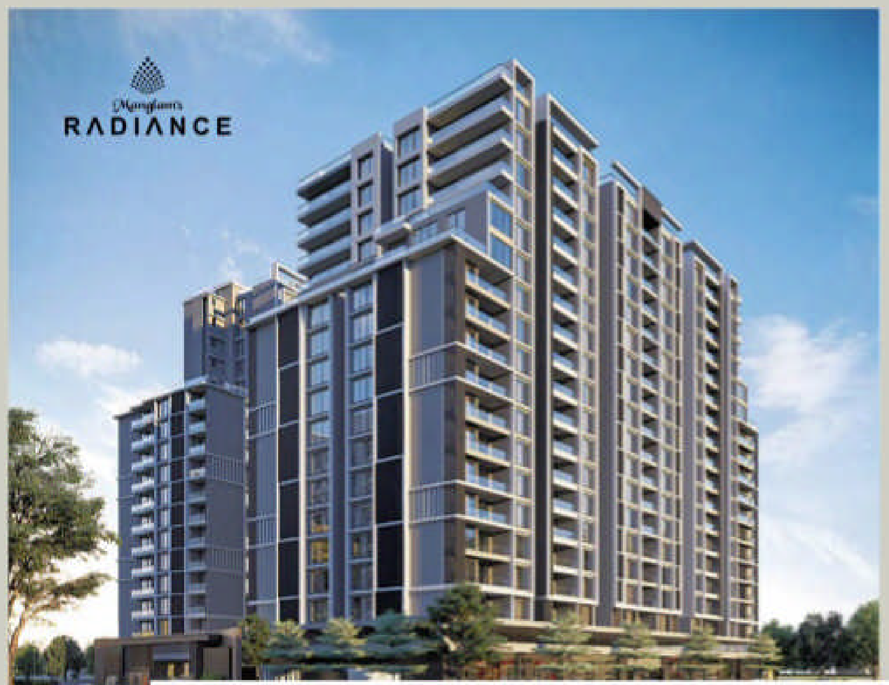
Manglam Radiance remains close to my heart as it marks the dawn of a new age living. An epitome of next generation luxury – it is an amalgamation of modern housing apartments with phenomenal life-enhancing philosophies catering to the functional needs of the conventional Indian living.

CURRENTLY WORKING ON

As a Founder and Rajasthan Coordinator of CREDAI Rajasthan Women Wing - A Real Estate Community organisation for women developers, I am working on Women Empowerment Series called Trishakti for the CREDAI Raj women wing. Based on the lessons taught by three deities - Durga, Lakshmi and Saraswati, Trishakti adheres that true power lies in helping people in need. As a conscious effort, we will be skill training our women labourers on construction sites for Paintwork not only in Rajasthan but also across the nation, making it a national movement.

SUCCESS MANTRA

Aspirations should never end and the process of learning should go on. Moreover, in order to achieve big, you should never stop dreaming and also work in terms of uplifting the society by aiding the ones in need. Also, it's the unwavering family support which matters to map a successful career. Bringing out the best of me, I sincerely credit my father in law, Mr N.K Gupta, Chairman, Manglam Builders – who has not only mentored me but also motivated me to push boundaries. Abiding by his principles, I too believe that success becomes evident if you continue to nurture your abilities constantly!



18+

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SMART LIVING

Home automation can help you turn on lights, stream music, cook and clean, all at the click of a key or the sound of your voice

By **ADITI PAI**

Tasks that were once ideas restricted to science fiction films are now a reality in the comfort of your home. With the right use of cutting edge technology, you can get the home of your dreams—an interactive space where the living areas magically transform into a multitude of options. “When all our gadgets have become smart, it is obvious that our homes keep pace with them. Home automation allows you to leave some of the mundane activities like opening the curtains, switching on the lights, home appliances, air conditioners and such to technology and focus on important tasks,” says architect Aparna Kaushik.

HANDS-OFF

Saying ‘Good Morning’ can mean a whole lot of things for people in smart homes. Your morning command to your Savant app, a smart home automation system, will make your favourite song start playing even as the geyser switches on automatically in time for a hot shower. In your parents’ room next door, the words can trigger personalised modes such as opening the window shades, turning off the air conditioners and turning the lights to 20 per cent to conserve electricity. Similarly, you can use other code words and commands to get your home to follow your bidding. Say ‘nap time’ and the lights go down to zero, the air conditioner sets to a comfortable 24 degrees and the curtains close. Gadgets like Cubical Aura also have multiple sensors, supports air conditioners, televisions and music systems, senses gestures, temperature, and light and can be trained in up to 100 remote key actions.

LIFE MADE EASY

With work from home arrangements here to stay for a while, who wouldn’t

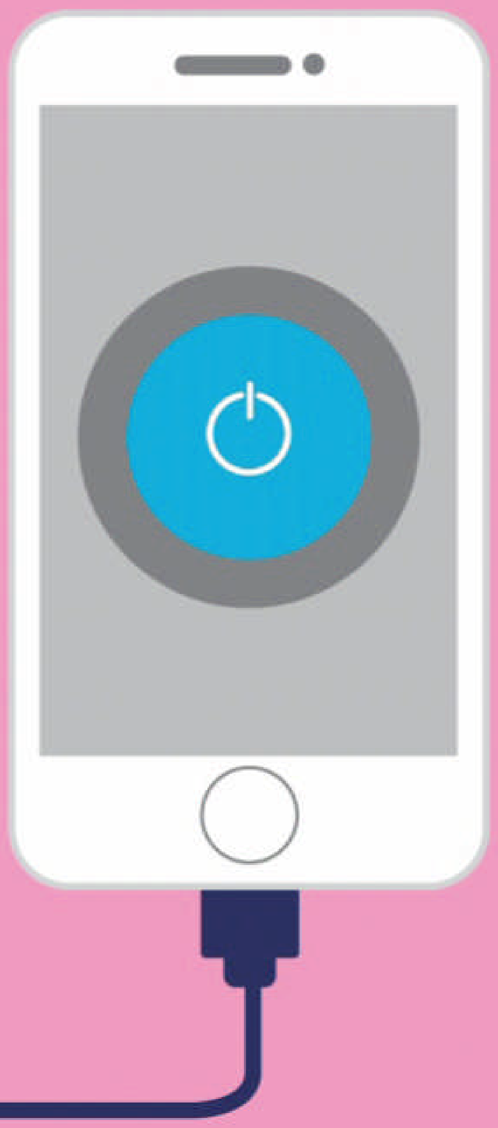

Illustration: RAJ VERMA

DOUBLE DUTY
On-Off designed by ATL Group and Tumidei can transform a bed into a sofa in minutes

> Security of the home is a topmost priority especially when you are away. With automation, it is possible to track every second of what's happening in the house with a simple app on the phone.

want a space that effortlessly transforms from a work day set up to a comfortable bedroom. The creatively named On-Off can transform your bed into a sofa and your work table into a dining set-up, all with the click of a key on the remote. Designed by Italy-based Tumidei and the ATL Group and available in India through Ottimo, On-Off is a smart, space saving solution that can effortlessly convert a room into multi-use spaces. "It utilises the same space and furniture to create two distinct ambiences—of daytime and night time and maximises comfort and usage with minimal space and resources," says Ashok Basoya, founder of Ottimo.

LIGHTS ON, LIGHTS OFF

Soft lights, bright lights, ambient lighting—it is all possible at the click of a key or a voice command to the sleek Palladiom keypad. In businessman Rohit Reddy's 6,000 sq ft Hyderabad home, lights come on and go off and electronic drapes glide together with once command to Alexa. The digital personal assistant uses his voice commands to control the gadgets in his home, right from the Lutron lighting controls to the Sivoia QS Drapery motorised shades that effortlessly glide over his tall glass windows and block sunlight. The HomeWork QS system by Lutron integrates all light fixtures, window treatments, and lighting controls into one main platform which controls tasks like lighting and shading and can even integrate thermostats and audio systems. While there are different methods to control this lighting system, AnushaTechnovision Private Limited which put together smart technology for Reddy's home, used the sleek Palladiom keypad to replace the traditional switches, which can take voice commands or follow directions on a remote.

WALK-IN SMART WARDROBES

Wardrobes with doors that glide open at the click of a button, a dresser that pops up when you want to check the shade of lipcolour, lit up shelves that are reminiscent of a fashion boutique and a wooden plank that gradually slides up to reveal a hidden security safe box. The smart wardrobes by German brand Schmalenbach are customised and remote controlled are one such example.

INTELLIGENT KITCHEN

Cabinets that open at the touch of your fingertips and smart refrigerators that manage your shopping list and set curd. One such example is the Samsung's family Hub smart refrigerator that keeps track of what lies on the shelves, sets digital post-its for tasks and provides entertainment while you cook. The built-in View Inside camera allows users to digitally label their food with expiration dates, or use a mobile device to peek inside their fridge. The all-new Curd Maestro takes away the trouble of setting the right consistency. Besides gadgets, smart storage also offers additional convenience. Take German brand Eggersmann (available at Plusch) for instance. They retail kitchens where the work station comes with a storage unit that rotates 360 degrees. So, it can be rotated open when required and closed when not in use. They also retail cabinets with sophisticate motors and drawers with sensors.

SCRUBBED CLEAN

Domestic chores are a tad easier with robotic cleaning devices and drying racks. Cleaning robots like the ones by iRobot Milagrow can dust, sweep and mop surfaces within minutes, self-charge, return to their charging docks and resume cleaning once fully recharged. While the remote operated clothes drying rack from Evolve makes laundry handling easier and neater. The rack has four stainless steel poles which can be expanded to seven feet in length. The battery operated rods can be lowered to a height of five feet to make it easy to use without having to stretch.

SAFE AND SECURE

Security of the home is a topmost priority especially when you're away. With automation, it is possible to track every second of what's happening in the house with a simple app on the phone. A popular function is a remote unlock and lock, a home technology where the home can be opened at

> Cabinets that open at the touch of your fingertips, smart refrigerators that manage your shopping list and set curd, storage drawers that slide out sensing your hands, a television that retreats into its space when you're done watching your recipe—this is what new age kitchens are all about.

Curd Maestro™

COOL IT
Samsung Curd Maestro refrigerator that sets and maintains curd

TECH THAT
Rohit Reddy's fully automated home in Mumbai executed by Anusha Technovision Pvt. Ltd

> Evolve has remote operated drying racks which can be expanded to seven feet in length to make laundry drying easy

the click of a smartphone key and unlocked when the visitor or house help leaves. Intrusion alarms promptly alert home owners in case of suspicious activity in the house. There are some very interesting intrusion alarm systems available with Bosch.

BECOME AN ECO-WARRIOR

Smart home technology can reduce energy consumption and make the space more energy-efficient. Smart plugs like the WiFi plugs by Syska can be automated to trigger a switch on and off mode to match scenarios like rain, sunrise and sunset to avoid uncontrolled usage of power. That's not all, the Fibaro Flood Sensor is a water detector that uses low energy wireless technology and raises alarms about flooding whenever it detects water and also measures ambient temperature. Smart thermostats and smart light bulbs save energy which helps cut utility costs over a period of time. "There are some home automation technologies monitor water usage too, helping you save the precious resource. So it allows you to be eco-friendly," says Kaushik. Then there are smart switches. One such example by Goldmedal is the i-Sense Senso Switch and the i-Touch Wi-Fi 6 module that allow users to control multiple devices through a feather touch, RF remote control, voice commands and a mobile app.

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PROMOTION

Wonderfloor introduces the world class luxury range of wood design floorings.

Make your floor come alive with Wonderfloor, which is not only synonym to vinyl floorings but also the flagship brand of RMG Polyvinyl India Limited , India's largest manufacturer and exporters of PVC flooring.

PVC flooring, also known as vinyl flooring is immensely popular not only for the array of choice for designs, shades, durability, foot comfort and affordability but also for the quick and easy installation.

Wonderfloor vinyl flooring is Made in India and support the 'Atmanirbhar Bharat' and 'Vocal for local' Government's policies for making India a self-reliant nation.

Wonderfloor floorings are available in sheet, tile and plank form in various surface textures, designs, patterns like natural wood, marble, stone etc for home / office interior, commercial spaces, stores, sports, fitness centre, schools, hospitals, transport etc.

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Timberland and Timberworld's are Luxury Vinyl Planks/Tiles (LVT) available in various shades and designs which are carefully chosen to complement the natural wood / Laminate flooring . These are stain resistant , fire resistant , anti termite and moisture resistant . LVTs are manufactured in our state of art plant near Delhi . The product range has already received over whelming response not only from the domestic market but also from Europe and USA.

We are also happy to introduce our non-directional flooring Trendo which is India's answer to the expensive imported flooring for hospital and healthcare industry. Trendo has been developed after a lot of research and feedbacks from the healthcare industry and medical professionals.

Trendo flooring is available in attractive wooden designs & non directional chip design and is most suitable for use in the healthcare industry as it has antibacterial and Anti static property as well.

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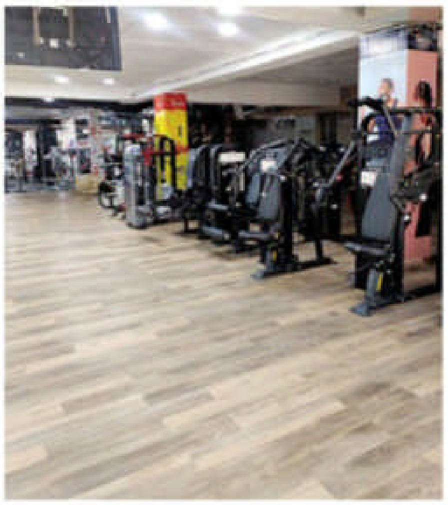
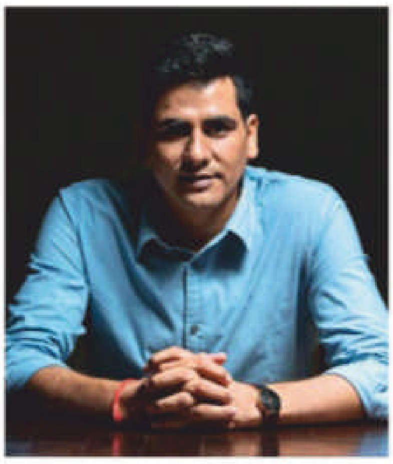


HAUTE IDEAS *for* COOL ROOMS

Like fashion, decor changes as per the season. But pairing the right colours with textures, prints and patterns can be daunting. Seven experts share their best-kept secrets.

By **RIDHI KALE**

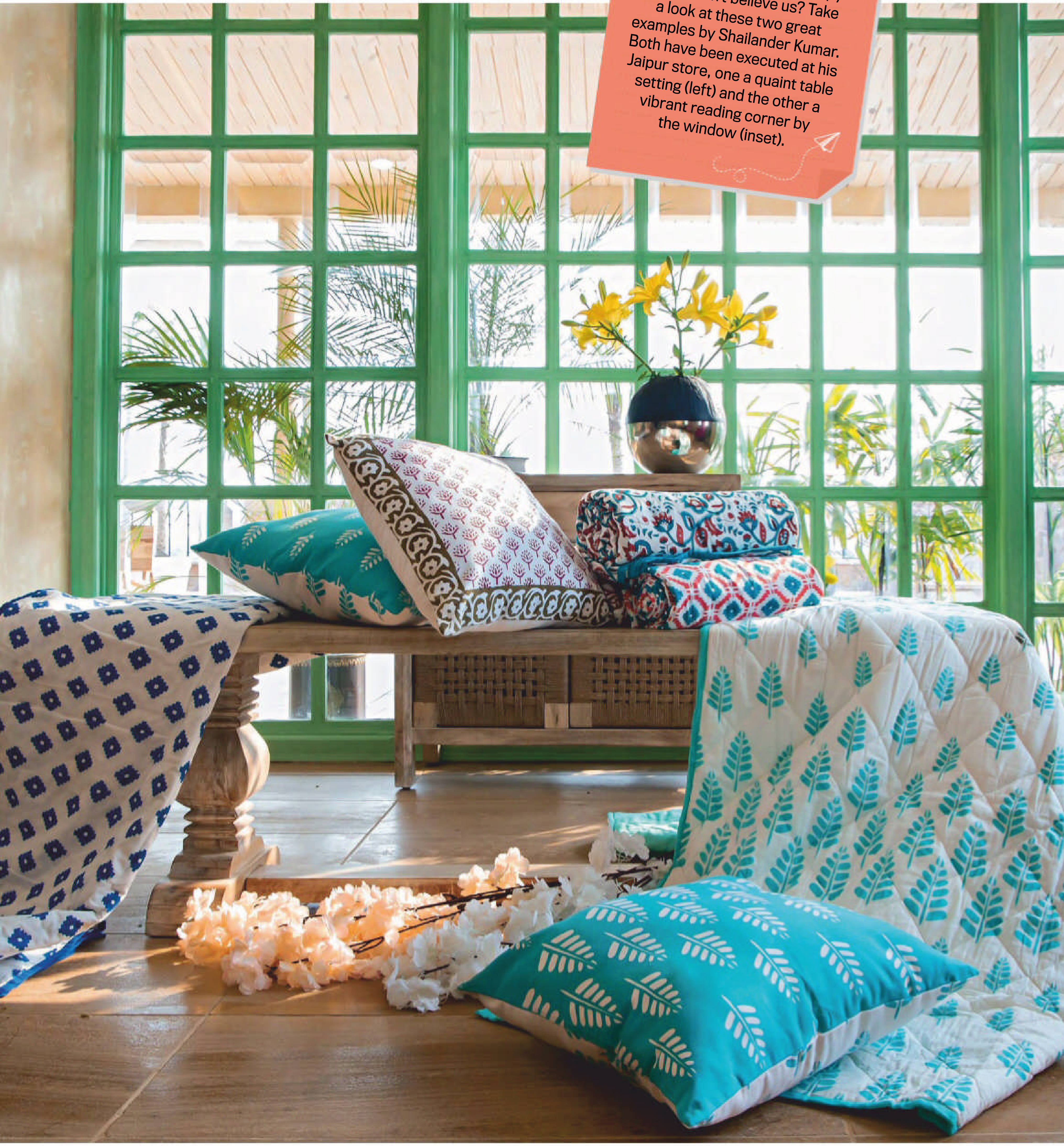


SHAILANDER KUMAR
CEO and Founder,
House of Fanusta
www.fanusta.com

LIGHT IS RIGHT You can go for white or nude-toned furniture in distressed finish or rattan furniture to create an ambience that's cool, breezy and fresh. Pale walls also invite more light into a room. Add pretty-blooms through motifs and patterns on rugs, pillows and bed linen that are light-weight and breathable. Extend living space outdoors, you can use white drop cloth curtains to offer a shaded seating area for hotter days.

TOP TABLES Floral, tropical and nautical theme cushions or table linen make for a free-spirited aesthetic. To add an organic appeal, you can also place succulents that are perfect for a cheerful tablescape and require little care.

AVOID THIS Even though chevron is a patent pattern for hotter months, pairing it with light coloured flooring and pastel upholstered furniture is a design disaster. Another big no-no is teaming red, green and blue together. Instead use these hues individually in separate settings.



CASE STUDY

Blue is a quintessential happy shade. Don't believe us? Take a look at these two great examples by Shailander Kumar. Both have been executed at his Jaipur store, one a quaint table setting (left) and the other a vibrant reading corner by the window (inset).

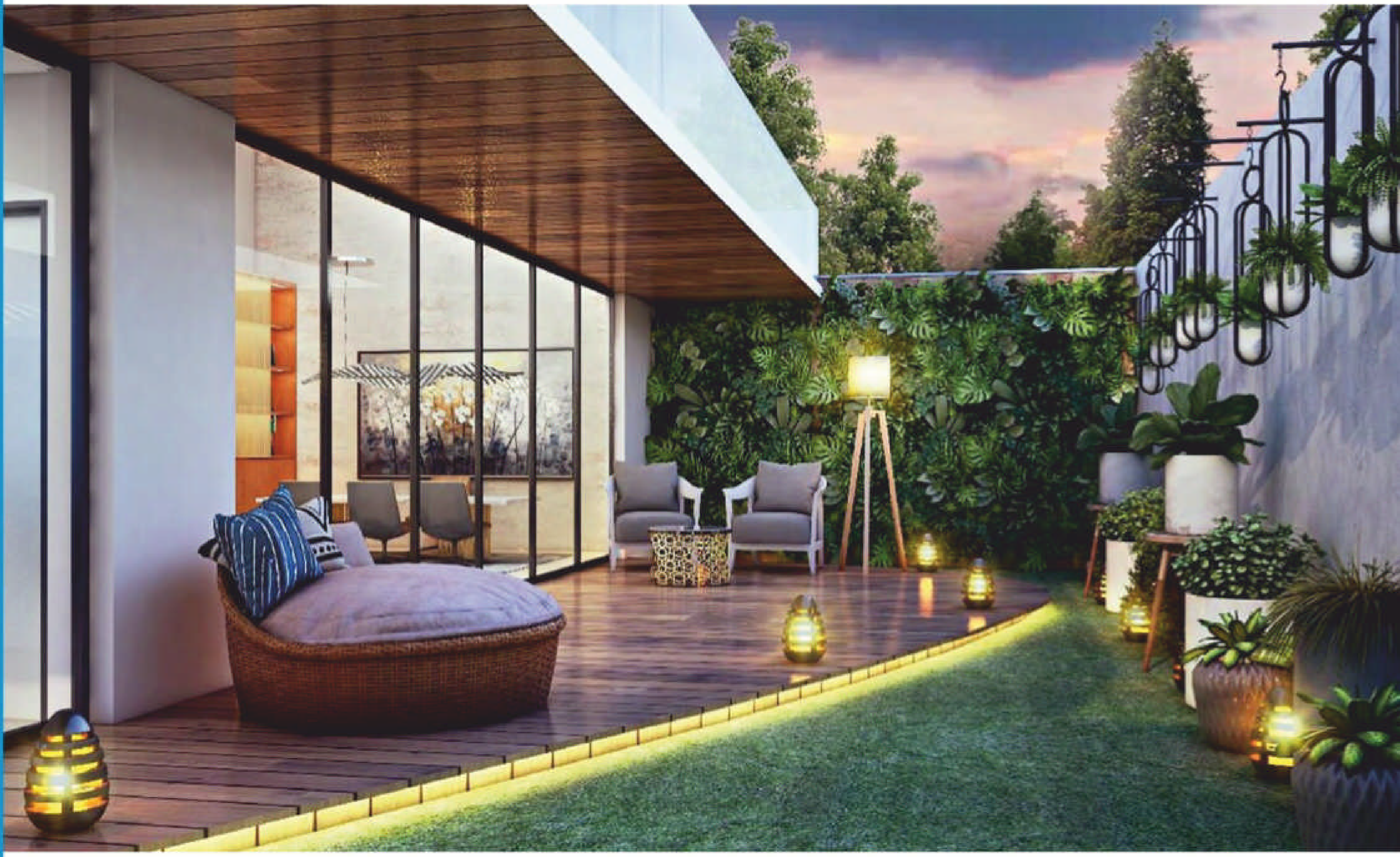
GO BOHO A great idea is to bring in a bohemian theme that has a calming and cooling effect. This can be done by adorning your living room with flowers—real, painted or printed. If you have plenty of dark wood in your house, revamp it for the season by painting it white. Given the natural coolness of the colour, white is easy on the eyes and desirable, especially when it is hot outside. Also, it soaks the minimum amount of heat among all colours.

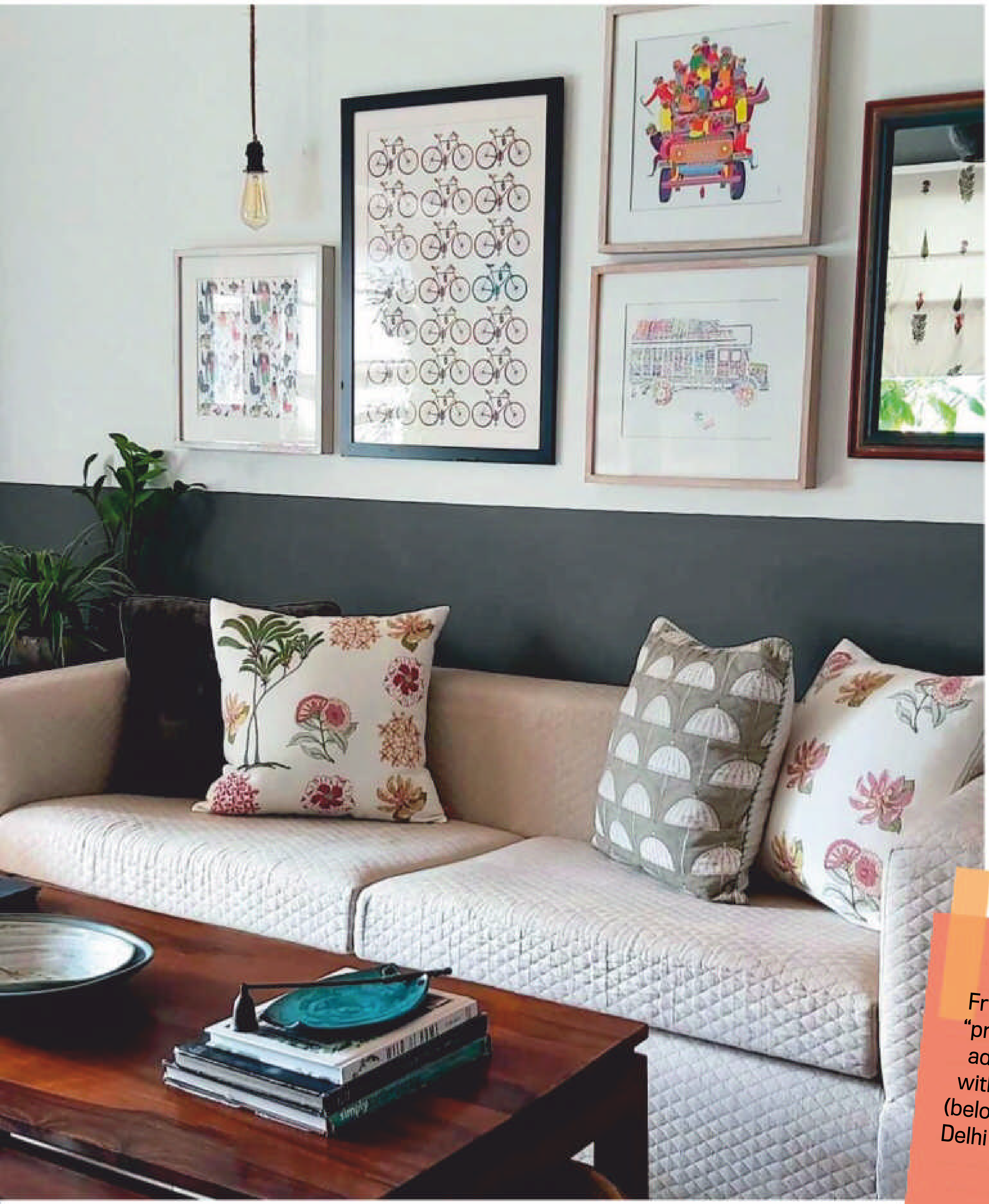
BEDROOM BASICS For your bedroom, you can place a botanical headboard over your bed for a knockout punch. If you prefer a royal appeal, you can add a pure white canopy over the bed as well.

HOME WORK To make your study more trendy, you can frame your favourite picture of a map of your hometown or your favourite vacation spot and hang it up. It adds class to the interiors.

CASE STUDY
Located in Emerald Hills, Gurgaon this home is the perfect summer escape. Bhawana Bhatnagar has used a lot of greenery to make it "a true shelter from the heat wave outside". Her quick tip is to use mist cooling gadgets to ensure you feel comfortable.

BHAWANA BHATNAGAR
Interior Stylist and Founder of Casa Exotique
www.casaexotique.com





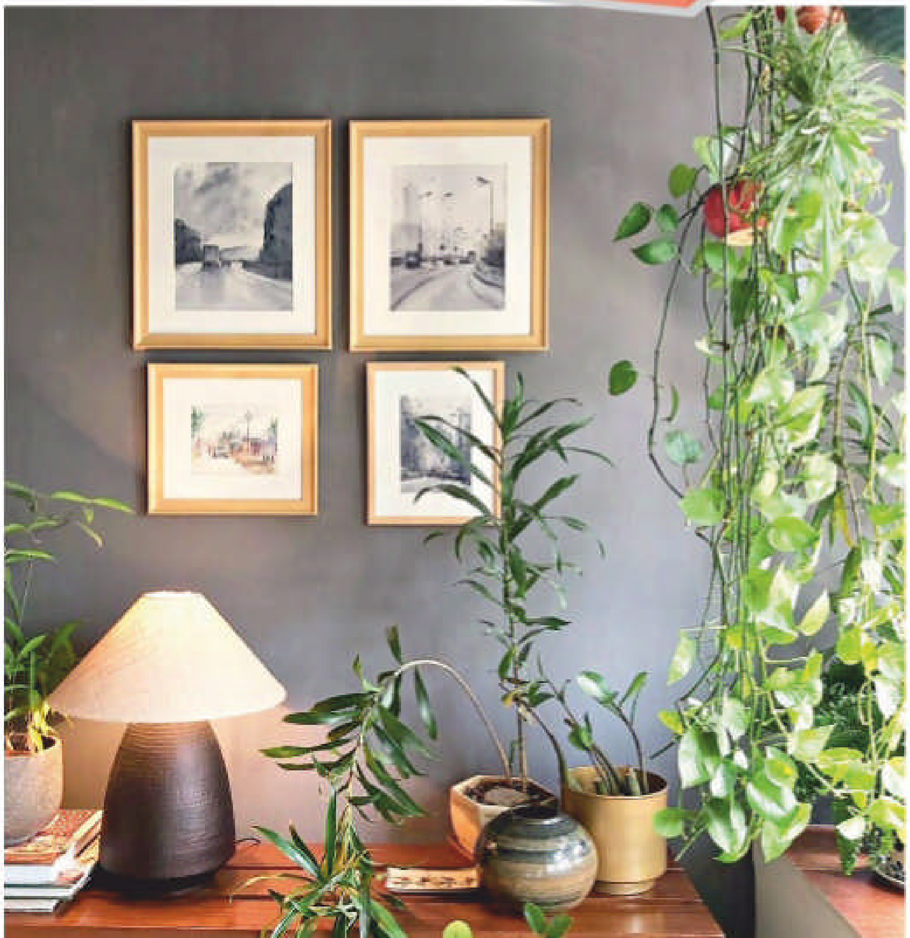
JASLEEN SINGH
Interior Stylist,
The Ketli Home
@theketlihome (Instagram)

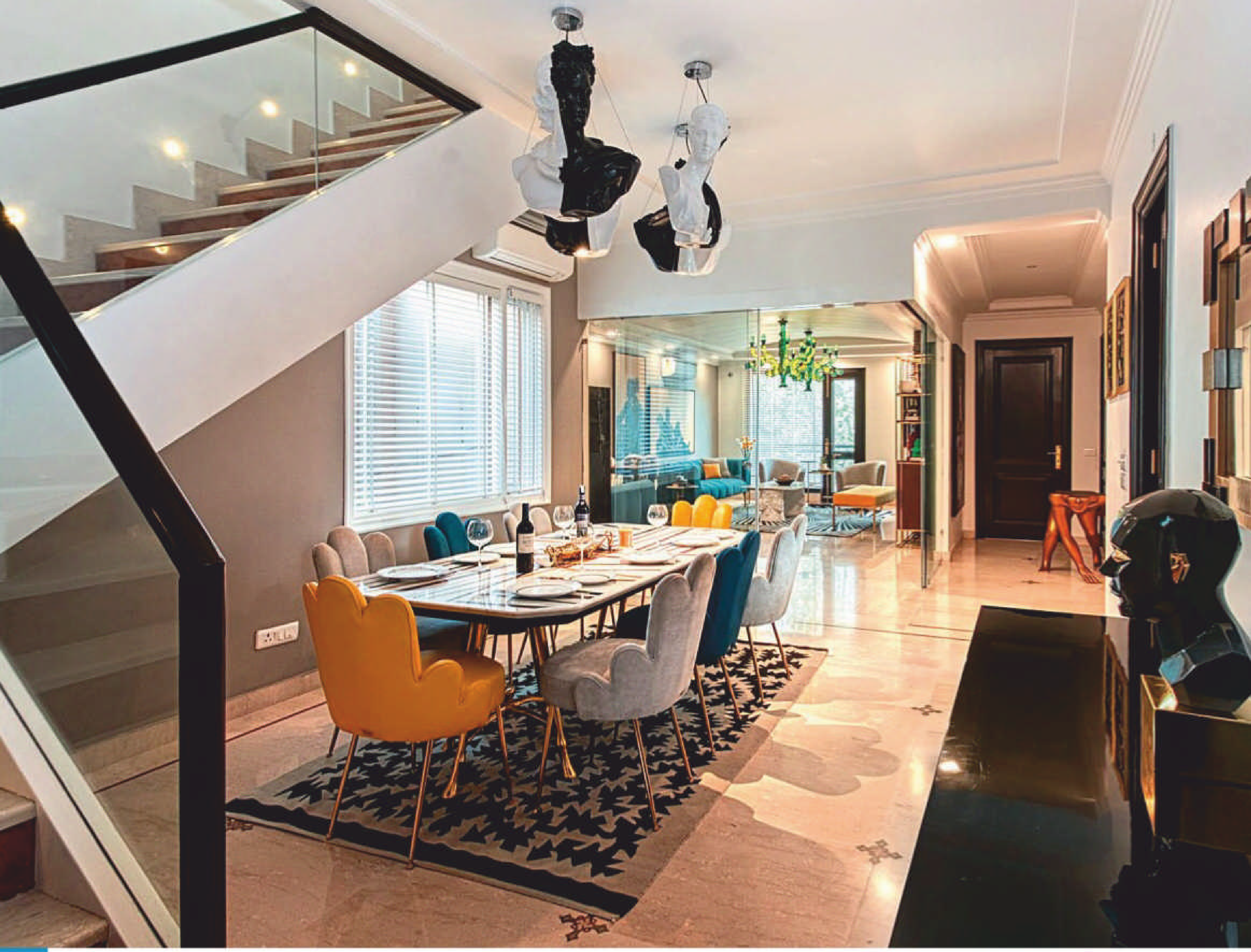
QUICK TIPS Bring in natural textures such as bamboo or jute baskets for plants or for storage. Leafy prints on a couple of cushions will give a room a lighter and brighter feel, and it's also an instant mood lifter. Introduce some scents such as lemongrass and jasmine via room sprays or essential oils such as sweet orange, lavender and citronella through diffusers.

CASE STUDY
From teaming grey walls with "prints in small doses" (left) to adding a sense of freshness with a cluster of indoor plants (below)—Jasleen Singh's home in Delhi is a good example of decor done right.

WINDOW WONDERS Swap those heavy drapes for sheers. Whether you have curtains or blinds, change the fabric to a lighter diaphanous material like *malmal* or muslin. Do away with dark shades and opt for pastels or whites. The softer colour palette will also make the room look visually lighter. Bamboo blinds are ideal for the season. They filter in light while keeping things cool inside.

PERFECT PARE As much as small decor items, more cushions, throws and more stuff help cosy up your space in winter, in the warmer months it's time to put all the unnecessary items away. A clean, minimal aesthetic will look less heavy and will definitely appeal visually. Clutter free rooms are just cooler, literally.





NATASHA JAIN
CEO & Co-founder,
Bent Chair
www.bentchair.com

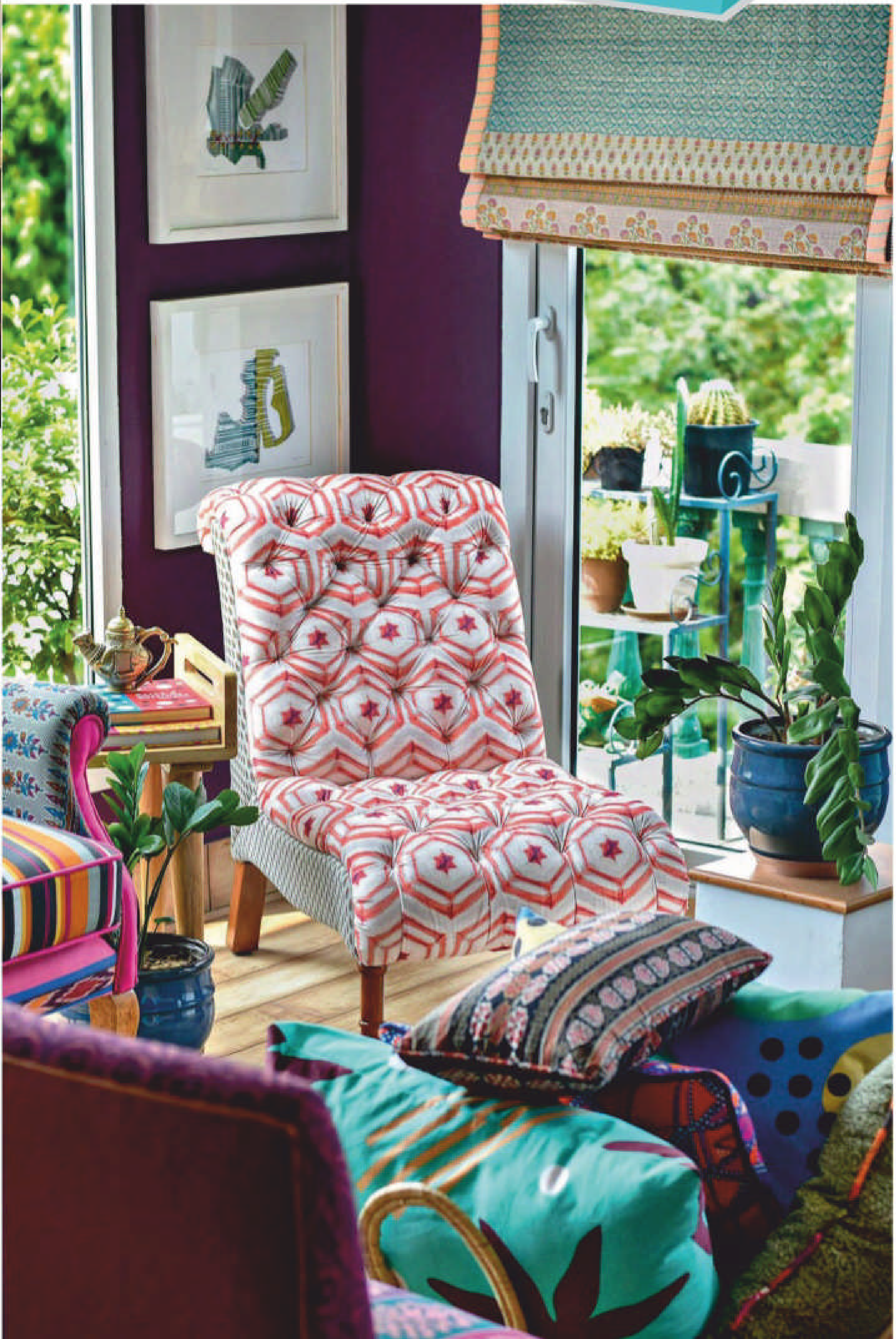
FOR THE LIVING ROOM The season calls for soothing and pastel shades. What better idea than to paint your walls in soothing shades such as baby blue, mint green or peach pink. Besides paint, colourful light fixtures also work well. Either buy a vibrant one or paint your existing illuminating device. Lastly, place oversized plants. Over the years, houseplants have evolved from a 'barely-thought-about accessory' to the main feature in a carefully designed room. Tiny indoor plants are delightful, but large, oversized ones are a growing trend.

CREATE A PRIVATE PARADISE In the bedroom use either beachy colours such as sandy beige, beach pebble grey, watery blues and summer whites or a summer garden colour palette of yellows, greens, pinks or mauves. Use lightweight breathable cotton blend linen and replace heavy furnishings.

BATH AND BEYOND Place a lush plant, colourful rug, and unexpected window treatments in the bathroom. Opt for small potted orchid or asparagus fern and place it in a corner. Shades of blue bring a calming feel to the space.

CASE STUDY
Sameer Bhatia and Kanu Sharma Bhatia, founders of House of Candy have a beautiful home in Delhi designed by Natasha Jain. Featured here is the dining. The dining chairs in three different shades steal the show.

CASE STUDY
This beautiful space is at Aradhana Anand's own studio. The walls are dark but use what she describes as an "inherently cool colour". To add to the look, bright furniture made using cotton canvas, woven cotton saris and cotton upholstery fabric have been used.

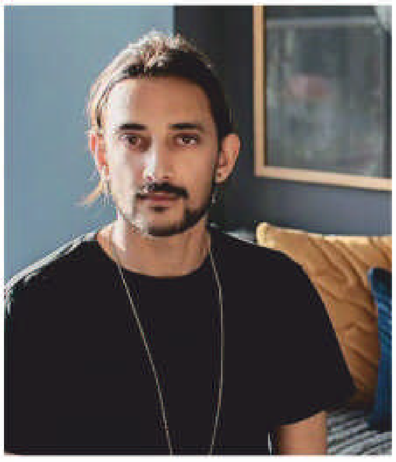


GO NATURAL Introduce products and accessories made from natural fibres such as cotton, linen, nettle, hemp, coconut and burlap. Natural fabrics will always give the room an airy, breathable feel over synthetics, even in darker colours and shades. Sofas or chairs should also be upholstered using textiles that can breathe over synthetic, leather, velvet and suede.

HOME GROWN The use of plants, in water or in soil, in and around your home is perfect for hot months. Not only is green a soothing colour, but plants embody freshness, a very welcome feeling during the heat. I use syngonium (also known as the arrowhead plant), pothos, zamiculcaszamiifolia (colloquially known as the ZZ plant) and sanseviera.

HUE KNEW Use cool colours over warm, irrespective of darkness or shade. For example, use indigo or teal, instead of orange or maroon; with cooler colours you can go as dark as you want without overwhelming the room.

ARADHANA ANAND
Founder and Creative Director, Limon
www.limon-design.com



KUNAAL KYHAAN SEOLEKAR
Architect, Interior Designer and Founder, studioHAUS and The KOY Store
www.studiohaus.in

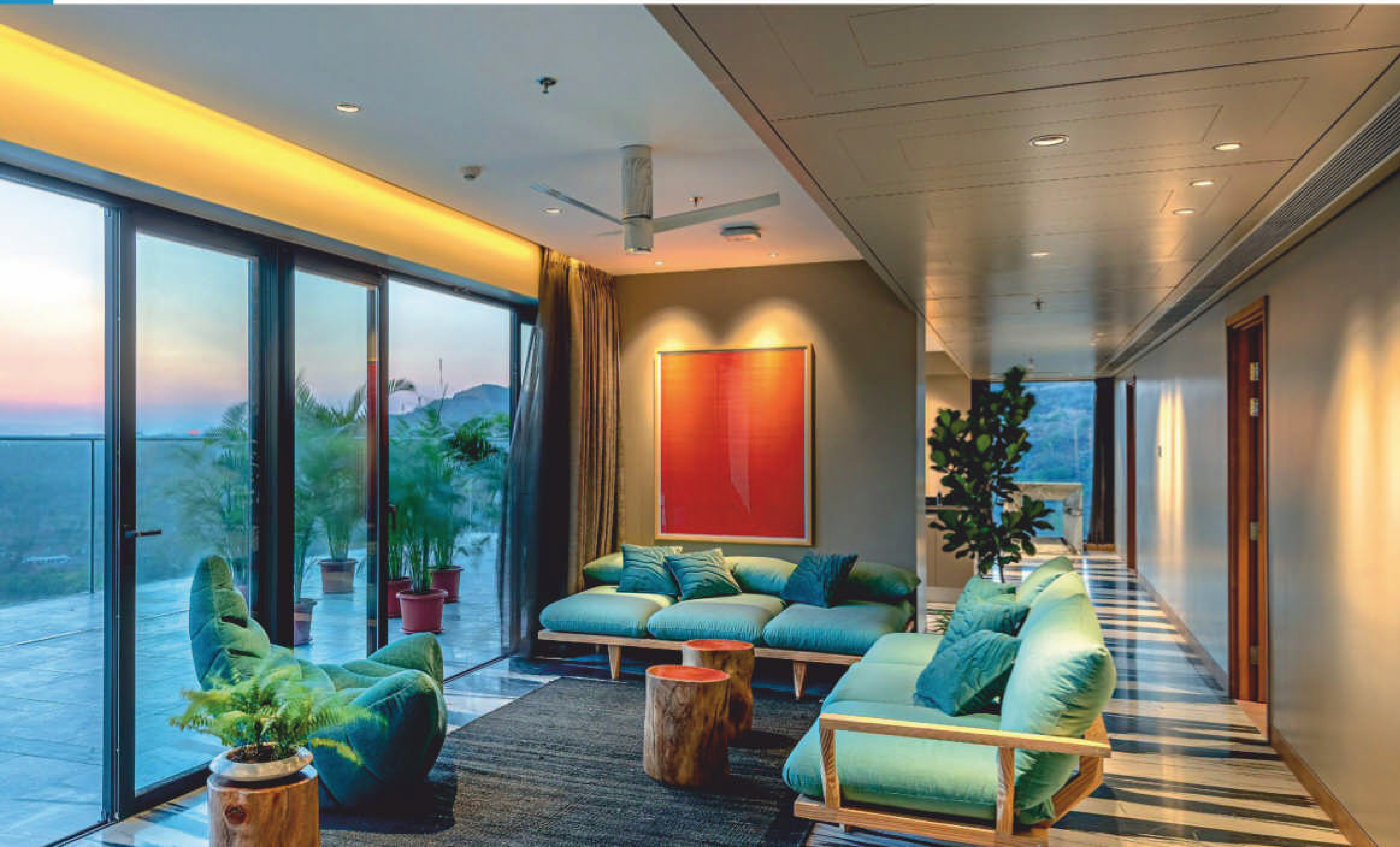
ROMANCING THE STONE Consider investing in stone and marble furniture, including dining and coffee tables, since these materials do not retain heat and are cool to touch and maintain. Revealing floor surfaces as much as possible will help keep your home cool in the heat; a cold stone floor is extremely relaxing to walk on during this season. Wool rugs trap a lot of heat, alternatively use hemp or jute rugs if need be.

MAXIMISE PASSIVE DESIGN STRATEGIES Incorporate cross ventilation, reduce direct heat gain, and add plants not only for shade and but also for cleaner air. Do not miss out on bathroom and kitchen ventilation which is key to remove trapped heat. This season is taxing on energy usage; decrease its consumption as much as possible. For instance, one can reduce the amount of lighting used to cut the heat and create an environment of tranquillity and restrict the amount of AC usage by substituting it with cross ventilation and a fan.

CASE STUDY

This luxury apartment at The Residences in Pune by Kunaal Kyhaan Seolekar is surrounded by lush greenery. He has used textures and materials that continue the natural palette within. Designed as an open plan the soothing hues bring the whole space together with the furniture, furnishings from his own brand KOY.

DESIGN FAUX PAS Avoid clashing colours or textures. Add hues that make you feel more relaxed and pick a different colour scheme for each room while still ensuring that they complement one another. Avoid using multiple small accessories, else the space will seem unnecessarily busy.



BRIGHT AND BREEZY Keep it light and airy with light or bright colours avoiding dark and deep hues. Use breathable fabrics and try out fresh fragrances.

LOVE OF LINEN Add fun cushions with light embroidery or bold tropical prints. Bedroom linen should be as breathable as possible, light solids always work or simple, bold prints but not too busy. Steer clear of velvets.

LOO AND BEHOLD In the bathroom, change your towels to white with monochromatic borders—keep it clean and simple. Remember to place plants everywhere.

CASE STUDY
In this villa designed by FADD Studio, built by Isprava in Goa, a soothing palette creates an arresting visual. Be it common areas (below), living spaces or the bedroom (above), it has a fresh and restful appeal.

FARAH AHMED MATHIAS AND DHAVAL SHELLUGAR
Design principals,
FADD Studio
www.faddstudio.com

“WE BUILD LIFESTYLES AND NOT JUST SPACES”

Armed with passion and innovation, Mumbai-based architect Nishita Kamdar creates unique spaces that tell a fascinating visual story

By RIDHI KALE

Photograph by SARANSH GUPTA

Architect of the month

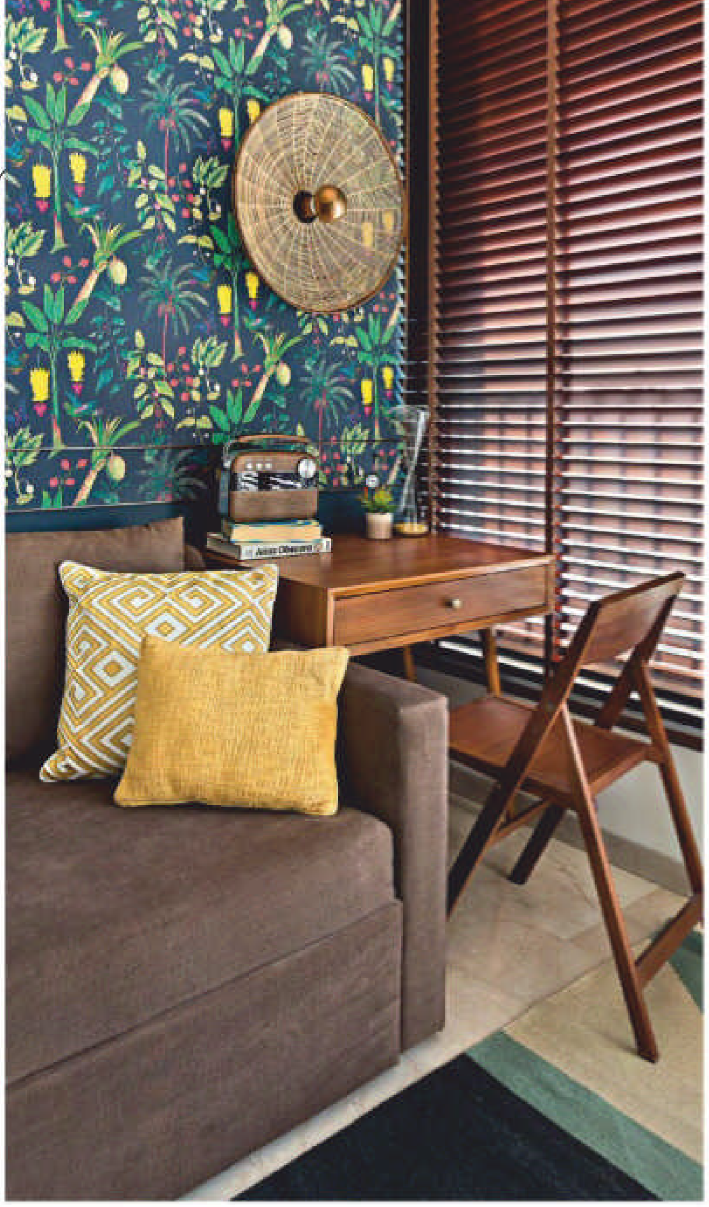
If architect Nishita Kamdar's official Instagram account is anything to go by, she is busy receiving awards, attending virtual decor and design launches, giving talks on architecture through Instagram Lives and webinars, while working on a multitude of projects. The 32-year-old, queen of social media says all this is possible because of her fairly regimented life, waking up early and immersing herself in work. At such a young age she has already done 25 projects, specialising in small size spaces—900 sq ft (about Rs 3,700 per sq ft). She is known for creating multi-functional spaces high on utility and sensitive to the requirements of the end user. Not surprisingly, growing up Kamdar always wanted to be an architect, there was never a "Plan B". She went to Kamla Raheja Vidhyandhi Institute for Architecture and Environmental Studies in Mumbai and did a summer school in Switzerland. Then, worked for renowned architects and firms across the globe including Narendra Dengle and Associate Architects, MOOF, Rast Architekten, LAB Architects and Architecture Brio. She then started Studio Nishita Kamdar in 2014 and has now added a furniture design wing called Pieces of Desire or POD.

1. How would define your design style?

A home needs to be tailormade to its occupants and not driven by trends. It needs to be a collection of the owner's memories and not a collection of images they have liked or spaces they have just seen in pictures. Hence we don't stick to one style when we design. Instead, we spend a lot of time with the clients and their family to understand their taste, how they live, socialise, interact, their likes and dislikes, and then try to adapt the space.

2. You have worked with renowned firms do you feel your design is influenced by them?

I have been fortunate to have worked with absolutely incredible offices at the start of my career. I did my thesis *The Eyes of the Skin* for which I won the prestigious Charles Correa Gold Medal, under the guidance of architect Samira Rathod. I wouldn't deny the fact that a lot of my design sensibilities are heavily influenced by the all the mentors I have had. I feel the methodologies adapted by each office is what stays behind with



Photograph by STUDIO KUNAL BHATIA

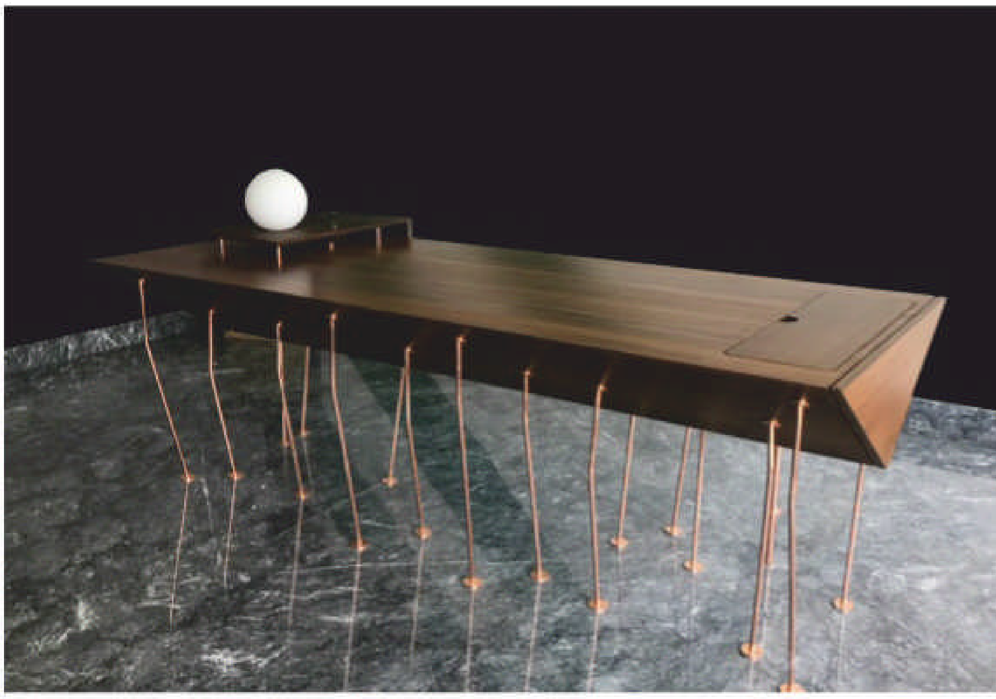
COLOUR AND CHARACTER Bright and airy spaces make up this home in Mumbai (below and left); architect Nishita Kamdar on Cocoon a single seater swing from POD (previous page)

Photograph by STUDIO KUNAL BHATIA

Architect of the month

Photograph by REENA GOGHARI

SMART DESIGN
The Limerick Store, Kalaghoda, Mumbai shows restraint in design and allows the merchandise to do the talking (left); the Centipede table is a whimsical take on a mundane office table (below)



you and is an important learning.

3. As a young firm, any challenges faced?

I practiced as a junior architect for two years before starting Studio Nishita Kamdar. It was simply an urge to be creatively free and express myself. Since then we have faced several rejections when we pitch in for projects, this used to really bog me down, till we studied why this was happening and kept working on making our pitches stronger. Being a complete outsider in this industry with no design background in my family, I had to ensure I had my right network of friends and clientele, one that lifts each other; it is very important to grow together.

4. What projects are you currently working on?

The current range of work includes a lovely architectural project, a bungalow in Bangalore for an NRI; a rustic farmhouse for a couple in Lonavala; an exciting container home in Nashik; a retail store in Kolkata; and an innovative home in Hyderabad (our largest to date). Besides this we are constantly working on creating new products for POD. The coming year is all about carving a niche for our forte and making sure we use local techniques, manpower and materials and make ourselves as home grown as possible.

5. Why start POD?

The last few years I have keenly observed the rapidly changing nature of the design market, its loopholes and demands. I had an increasing urge to fill these gaps with good design affordable to all—and so POD was born (along with my co-founder Veeram Shah). The products are a result of intense and meditative research driven process and at the same time show the term “good design” in a new light.

6. How many projects do you work on at a time?

We are a small studio of four to five people including me, we try to pick up a mixed bag of projects to avoid monotony. From architecture, to residential interiors, commercial interiors and furniture design—we’ve dug our fingers into various small scale design projects. We try to pick up no more than five to six projects at a time so we can do justice to it.

AT www.studionishitakamdar.com

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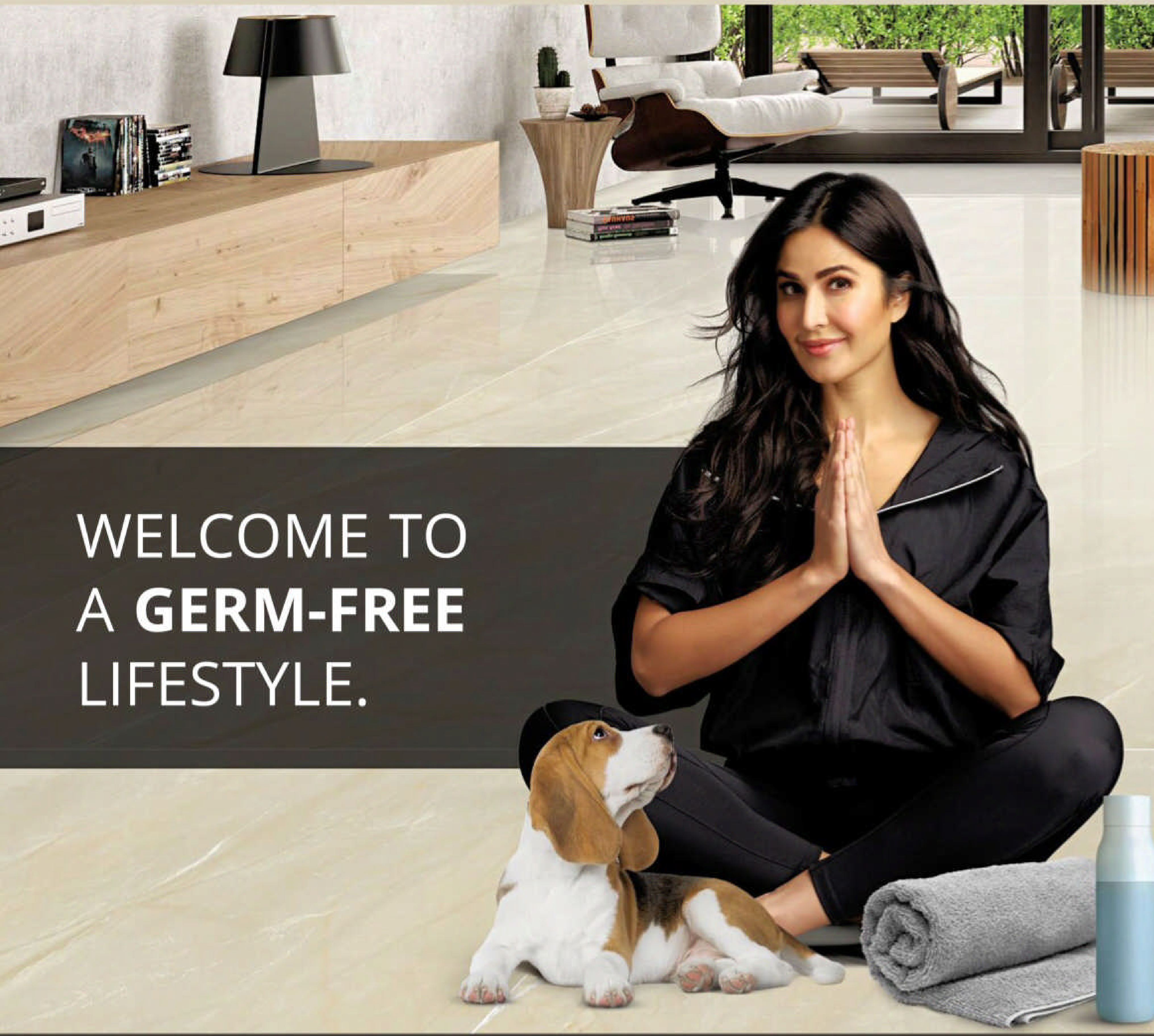

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